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ANDY McNAMARA
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
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A Quarter Century Of E3

E3 has been around for 25 years, and I've seen them all – the ups and the downs. The show has taken many forms during its lifetime, and while I have my share of complaints and concerns about it, I'm certain the game industry needs E3. It's the one time a year when games are at the center of the world stage.

Dates for E3 2020 have already been announced, so we know the show is marching on. However, I really hope the Entertainment Software Association takes a hard look at why companies keep moving away from E3 instead of embracing it. Sony's absence was conspicuous as I wandered the halls this year, but it wasn't the first company to jump ship. Activision, EA, and even Microsoft (who was just up the street from the convention center), were also notably absent from this year's show floor.

The exodus has been growing for quite a while, and it has a noticeable impact for those of us who walk the less-crowded show floor – but to the fans and news outlets who watch the spectacle unfold via streams, the impact is less obvious. To them, the politics and logistics of the actual show mean less; they just want to see what's next in gaming. If you judge it from home, I'm sure E3 seems stable. But when you are on-site, the cracks in the façade seem obvious.

E3 is an important part of the game lifecycle, and with the right leadership and vision, I think the ESA can entice back the companies that have walked away. I want the ESA to embrace entertainment and turn this show into the ultimate showcase for games. The answers I feel are just down the road at Disneyland. Attendees could use apps and fast passes to reduce the lines. The convention could integrate the offsite developer panels and create themed experiences that bring the game demos to life. Space Mountain is an average roller coaster at best, but it is all the things around it that make it great. Make E3 the epicenter of game experiences, both in person and online. That will bring back the companies and raise its awareness even higher.

I don't know why we as an industry are squandering our biggest platform to show the world what makes games so special. But even if E3 can't adapt to the needs of modern publishers, developers, and fans, at least we know the games will always survive.

Enjoy the issue.

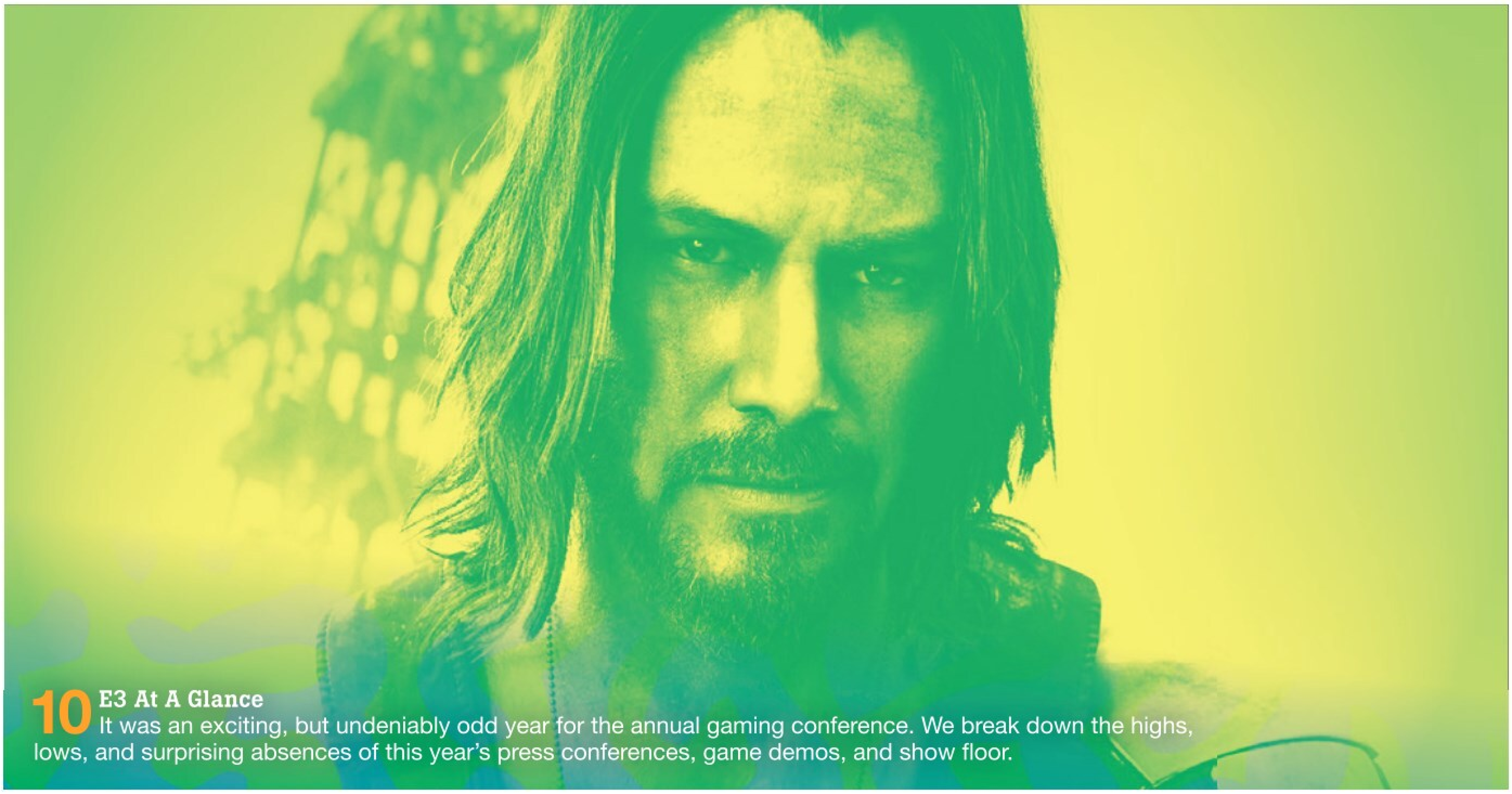
Cheers,

visit gameinformer.com daily for the latest and greatest, and follow @gameinformer on Twitter

0819

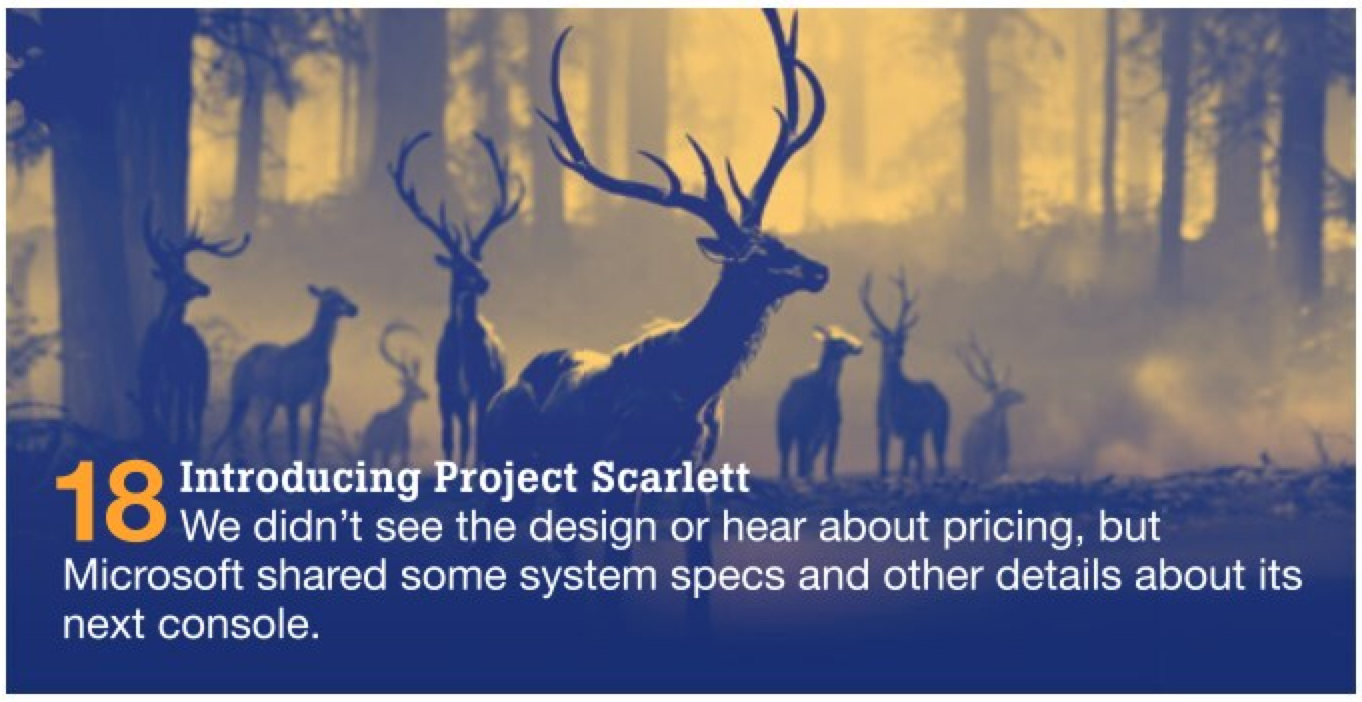
34 **Monster Hunter World: Iceborne**

Capcom's cult hit broke into the mainstream last year with Monster Hunter: World. Now comes a major expansion, Iceborne, which allows players to explore a new area, learn additional combat techniques for all 14 weapons, and gain unprecedented control of their prey during the hunt. Read our in-depth cover story for details on what to expect. ***by Jeff Cork***



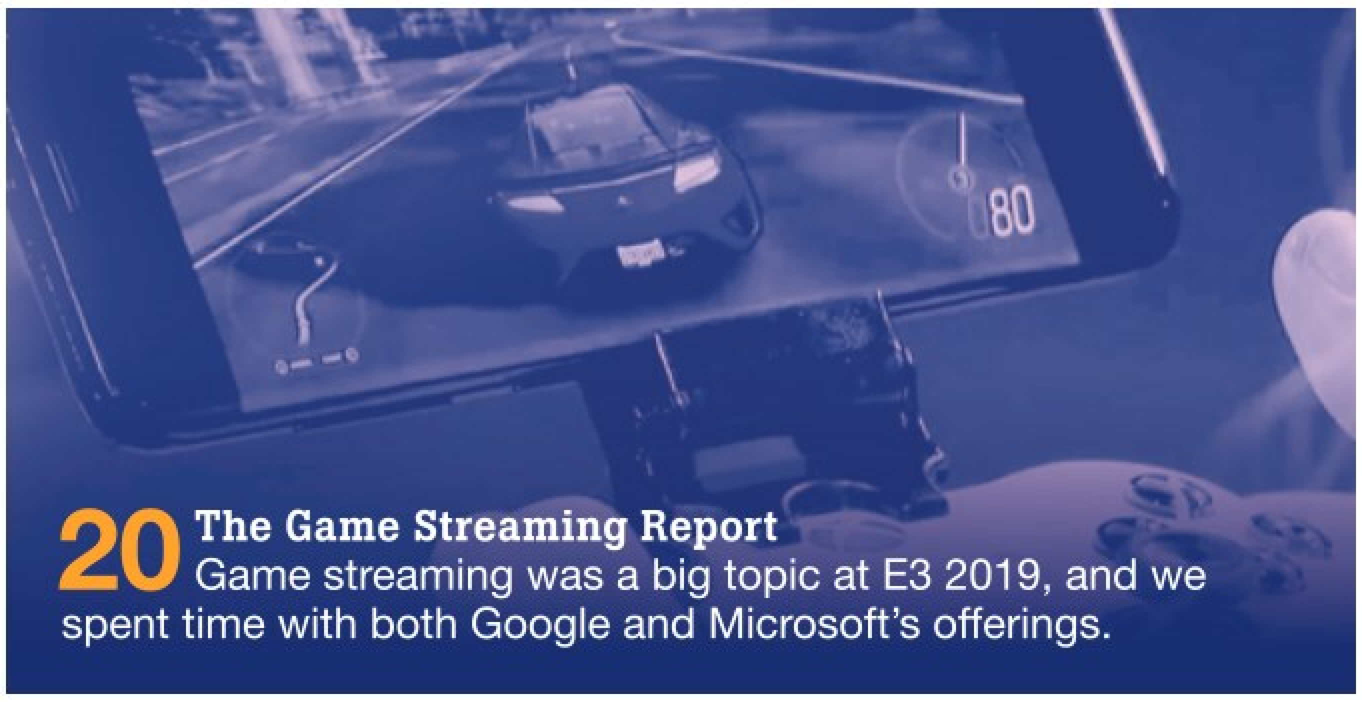
10 E3 At A Glance

It was an exciting, but undeniably odd year for the annual gaming conference. We break down the highs, lows, and surprising absences of this year's press conferences, game demos, and show floor.



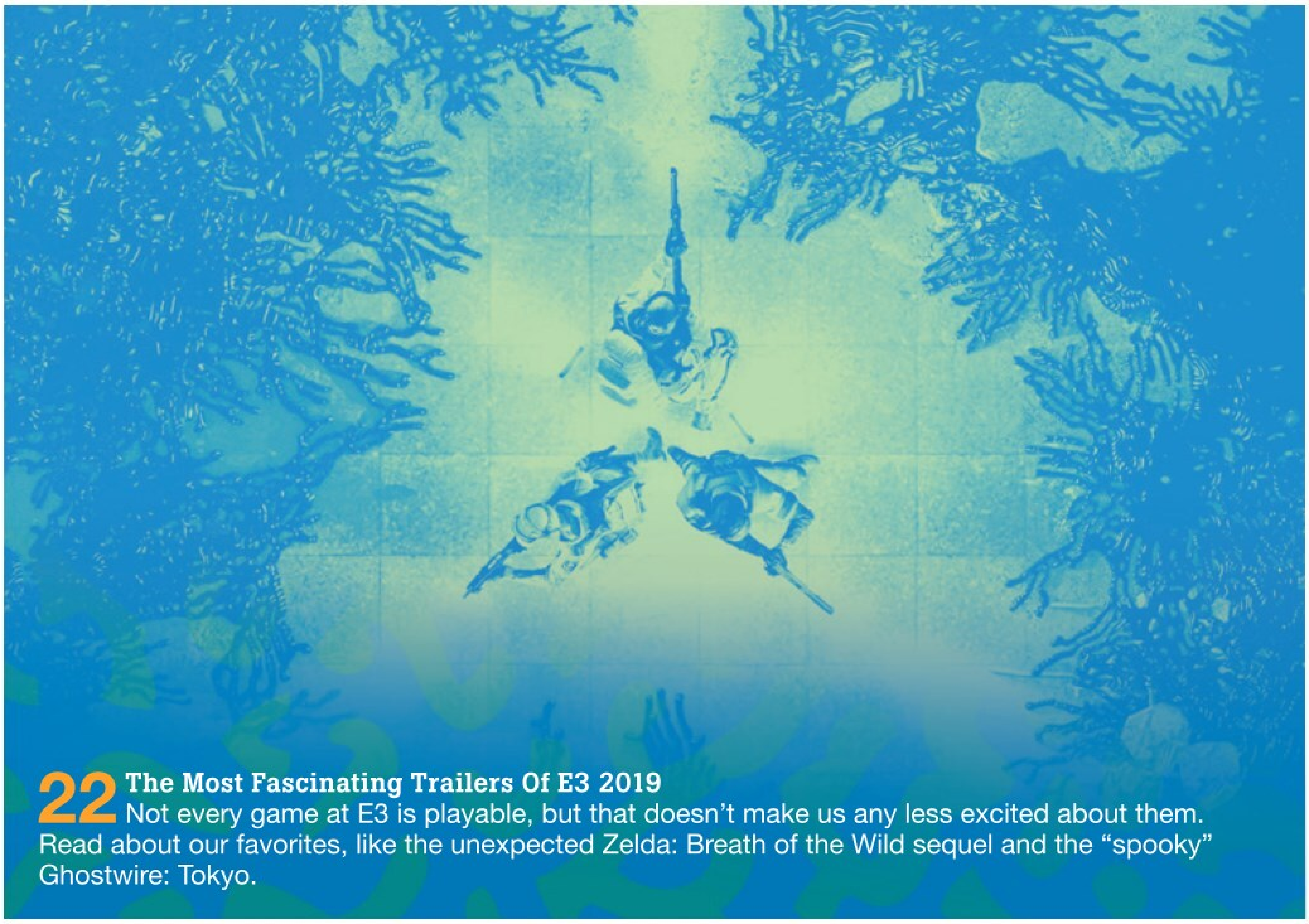
18 Introducing Project Scarlett

We didn't see the design or hear about pricing, but Microsoft shared some system specs and other details about its next console.



20 The Game Streaming Report

Game streaming was a big topic at E3 2019, and we spent time with both Google and Microsoft's offerings.



22 The Most Fascinating Trailers Of E3 2019

Not every game at E3 is playable, but that doesn't make us any less excited about them. Read about our favorites, like the unexpected Zelda: Breath of the Wild sequel and the "spooky" Ghostwire: Tokyo.

30 The Best Tech Of E3 2019

E3 has a lot more than just games. Here's our favorite gear from the show, including the revamped Microsoft Elite controller.

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46 E3 Hot 50
Sony and its impressive first-party lineup may have been missing from this year's E3, but there were still plenty of exciting games to see and play. After a friendly meeting that involved no yelling or hurt feelings, we narrowed our favorites down to a list of 50. Spoiler alert: Cyberpunk 2077 was really popular.

90 Persona Q2: New Cinema Labyrinth
The 3DS's final big release is a celebration of the series that inspired it.

91 Super Mario Maker 2
The Mario creation tool returns with lots of great new additions, but not many big changes.

92 Outer Wilds
This indie galaxy explorer has some amazing ideas, but it doesn't execute on all of them flawlessly.

93 Cadence Of Hyrule – Crypt of the NecroDancer Featuring the Legend of Zelda
This surprising spin-off has a fantastic soundtrack on top of capturing the charm of Zelda.

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• HERE'S TO •

THE SHOT TAKERS

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feedback

Sony's reveal of the next PlayStation didn't go unnoticed this month, and neither did those letters from confused Infarcer readers. Remember to share your own game-related thoughts by emailing feedback@gameinformer.com!

Preparing For PS5

I just read in the latest issue about Sony's new console (The Next PlayStation, issue 314). I have to say it sounds interesting. I like that every PS4 game would be backward compatible and that you can still use discs. You have to wait months, sometimes even years, for Microsoft to make games backward compatible, and they mostly do kiddy games and junk. I, for one, would never buy Microsoft's digital-only or cloud-based system. If you don't have super-fast internet connection it would be useless. If Sony puts a decent price on its next system, I would dump the Xbox One S I have.

Mike Dombrowski
Plainfield, IL

I appreciated the info on the next PlayStation. The PS4 seems to be in its final stretch, and it had a pretty good run since it launched in 2013. I'm still looking forward to its remaining exclusives, including Death Stranding this November. I'm not in a rush to get a PlayStation 5, though; I want to see more games running at a true native 4K resolution and 60 frames per second first. Also, I don't understand why the new system is offering 8K resolution support. That seems like overkill considering no one is even buying 8K TVs yet. I think 4K resolution will be the standard next generation.

Jeremy G.
via email

Sony's first tech demo of the next PlayStation certainly impressed, but we wouldn't count Xbox out just yet. Based on Microsoft's reveal at E3, its next-gen console, Project Scarlett, sounds comparable to Sony's next system. Whether Microsoft's first-party lineup can compete with Sony's bounty of exclusives remains unseen, but the company is heading in the right direction.

Contact Us

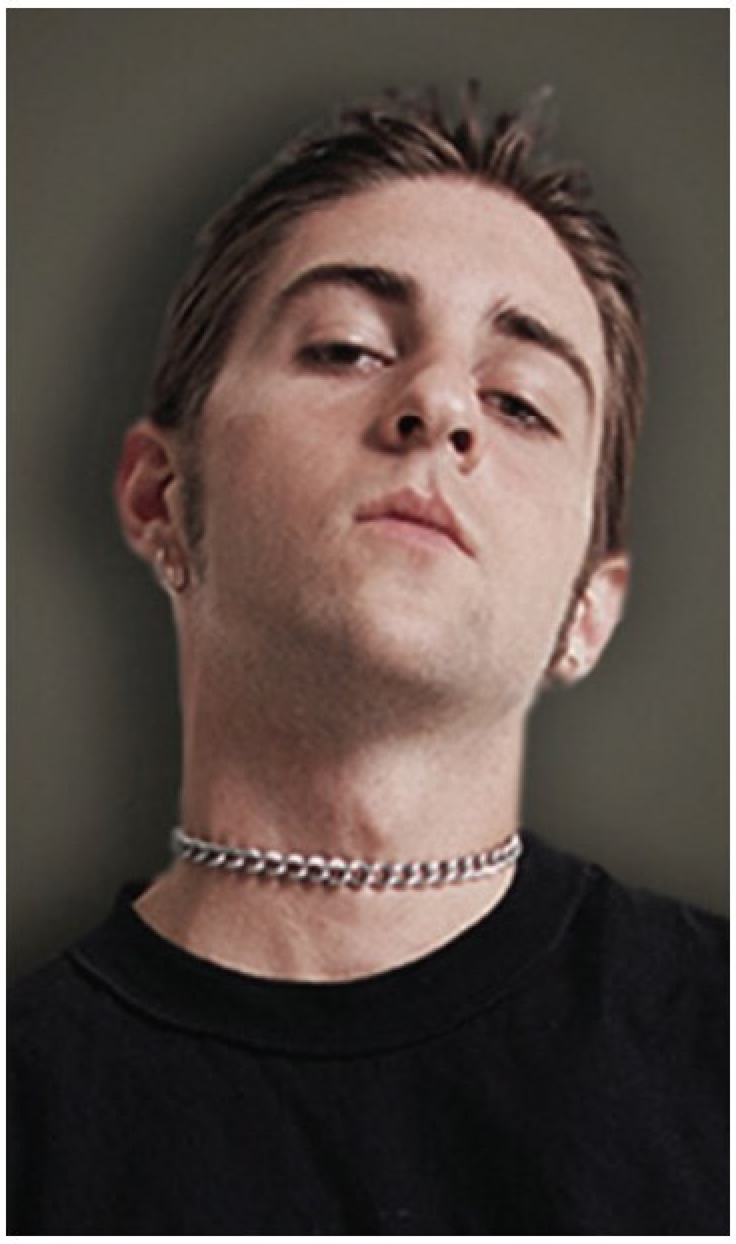
Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

The Last Laugh?

Reading the letters from people who were fooled by Game Infarcer and realized their mistake late or not at all astounds me every time. How long has this been a feature in the April issue? The second magazine cover *inside* of another magazine wasn't a clue? The obviously made-up (but hilarious – love you, Darth!) editor-in-chief? How about the word "farce" in the title? Or the word "parody" written on every page? No? Okay then, blissfully carry on!

Steve Richards
Rincon, GA

Game Infarcer is certainly a deterrent for just opening to a random page in the issue (and not reading the giant "PARODY" warning on said page), but we understand some readers' confusion. For instance, many people still don't realize that Darth Clark is an actual editor at G.I., and that all of his (outspoken) opinions are genuine. But hey, nobody's perfect!



Monthly Musings

Your magazine is a great resource for those of us seeking new games to play, and my friends and I find ourselves enjoying every issue. However, I was wondering how the Game of the Month award is decided upon. Is it based on a group vote in the office? Or the popularity of a game upon its release? This has been a growing question between my friends and me, and we would love to find out the answer.

Jacob Dearborn
via email

As you might guess, Game of the Month is typically awarded to the highest-scoring game of that month. However, this usually excludes ports and remasters, as they were already eligible at the time of their original release. In cases of a tie, we will sit down with the reviewers and discuss which game we think deserves the extra kudos, or occasionally consult our Ouija board to find out which game the cosmos favor.

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

"Any word on if Midnight Club is dead and my hopes and dreams have been squashed?"

Not officially, but probably.

"Will Alone in the Dark ever return?"

Sure, just turn out the lights!

"I heard they're reforming the Dawnguard. Is it true?"

Wait, we know this one – something something arrow to the knee?

Best Reader Correction Of The Month:

"After successfully defeating Prince Froggy's uvula in Yoshi's Island, you aren't spit back up. Yoshi is pooped out after the battle."

Question Of The Month:

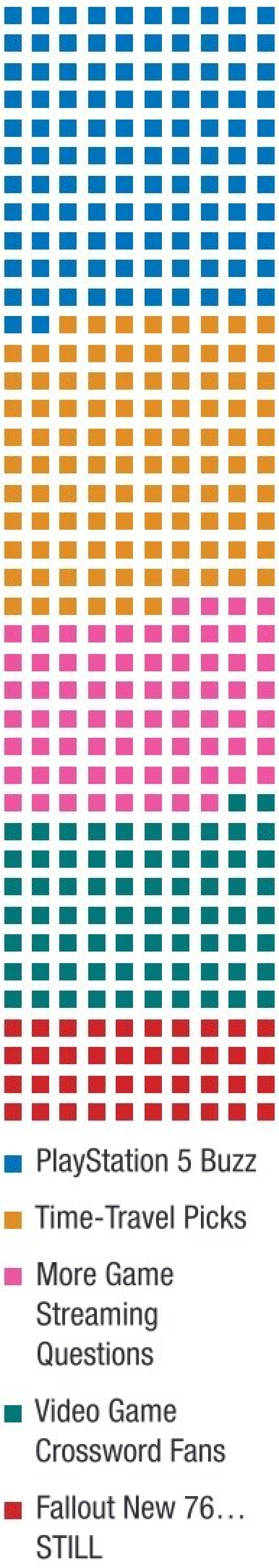
What game did you initially hate but learn to love over time? What changed?

gi spy

(Left) The G.I. crew ran into all sorts of legendary developers at E3, including Nintendo's Takashi Tezuka, who we tickled right before we took this picture. **(Right)** We also talked with Alex Hutchinson, John Romero, and Josh Holmes on The G.I. Show about leaving big studios to pursue indie passions.

PHOTOS FROM THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

On Your Mind



Back In Time

In issue 314, we swiped reader Michael Frederick's Question of the Month suggestion: What game would you send back in time to blow your young child mind? While some respondents feared their effects on the space-time continuum, they dutifully answered anyway.

Pretty much any game that features both Mario and Sonic (even the Olympic Games series) would be sufficient to blow my younger self's mind, as I grew up during the 16-bit wars. For maximum effect, however, I'd have to go with Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, since it also includes Mega Man, Pac-Man, and so many more franchises all rolled into one game!

Ryan Holm

I'd never do this because it would mess up the timeline (have you not seen *Back to the Future*?), but if I had to I'd give my younger self Mario Kart 8. Mario Kart DS and Mario Kart Wii were responsible for getting me into video games in the first place. I'm sure younger me would be totally stoked: "You can customize a kart or ride a bike that glides and sticks to walls?!"

Thomas Kelley

The answer is Splatoon 2, obviously. This would be the game to perfectly encapsulate how online/team-based gaming went on to dominate a large portion of the market, while also maintaining some level of platform-based familiarity with my younger self. The real deciding factor, however, are the Splatfests. These "dance parties" as my son calls them, are little glimpses into how whole cultures can emerge within the games themselves and how meaningful they can be to those who participate in them.

Jordan Brown

Try Harder

I just read your Gamer article on the streamer who completed all of From Software's Souls games without getting hit a single time (The Perfect Run, issue 314). It seems to me that anyone who spent 341 full days playing those games would be able do the same. The fact is, most gamers are not going to play a five-game set for that long. So, maybe do the no-hit run in a lot less time. Show me a no-hit run on the new game without having to play it for thousands of hours first.

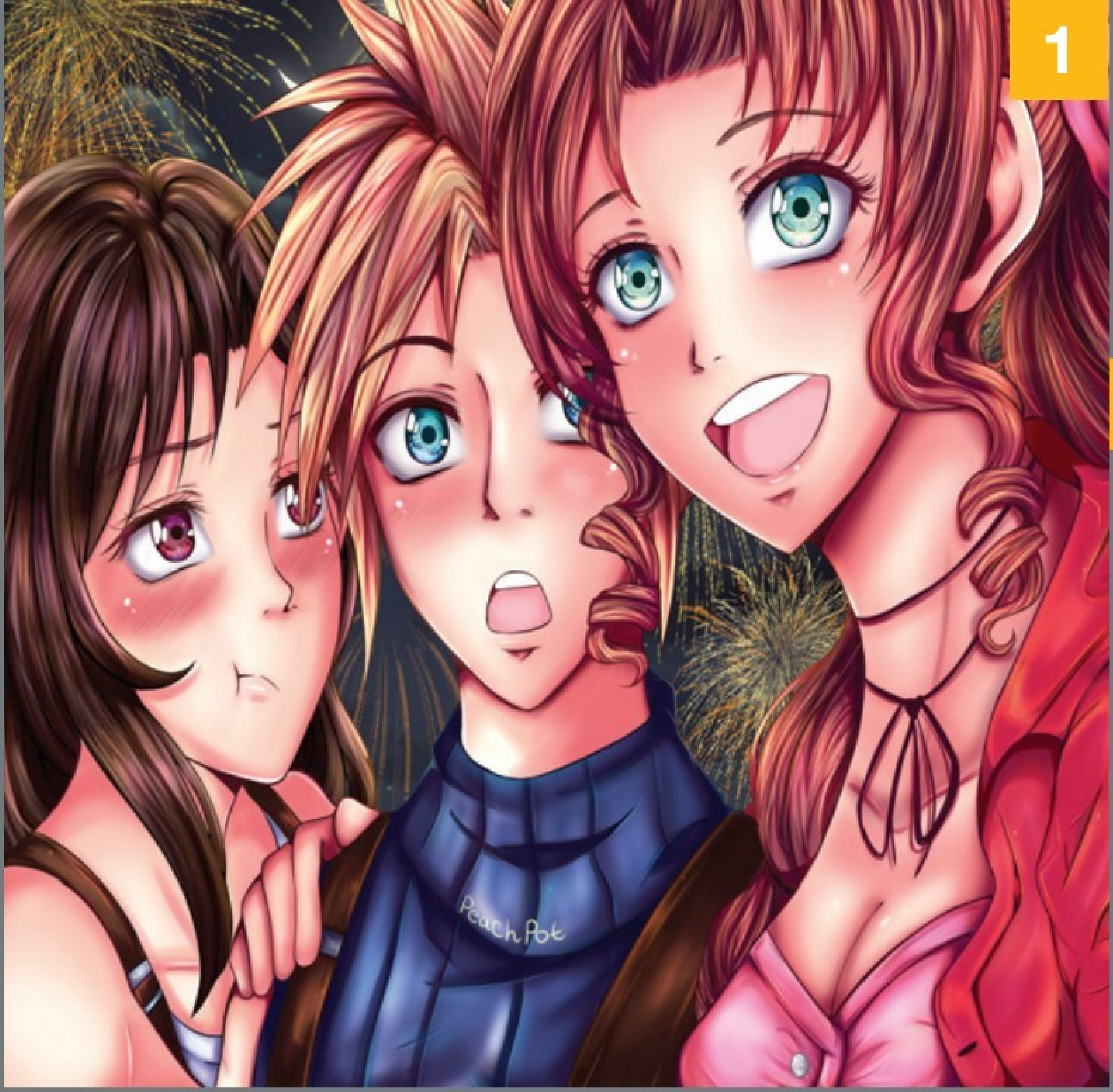
Mike B.
via email

We've got to be honest, Mike: We were pretty underwhelmed by your letter making arbitrary demands of a complete stranger after he accomplished a genuinely mind-blowing achievement. So maybe win an Ironman Triathlon and become a neurosurgeon first, and then write back to us and perhaps we'll be impressed.

Correction: In the feature "Back to Zanarkand" (issue 315), we incorrectly listed Yoshinori Kitase of Square Enix as the director of Final Fantasy X. The article should have referred to him as the game's producer.

(Left) This year Kim moderated a Telling Lies panel at the E3 Coliseum with the game's creator Sam Barlow (second from left) and actors Logan Marshall Green and Angela Sarafyan. We hope they told the truth! **(Right)** Suriel is still working on his picture poses, with a little help from Suda51.

gallery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WINNER

1 Sara Lynn

We're not sure about video game character selfies, but the Final Fantasy VII cast has reason to celebrate after this E3.

2 Rachel Monteiro

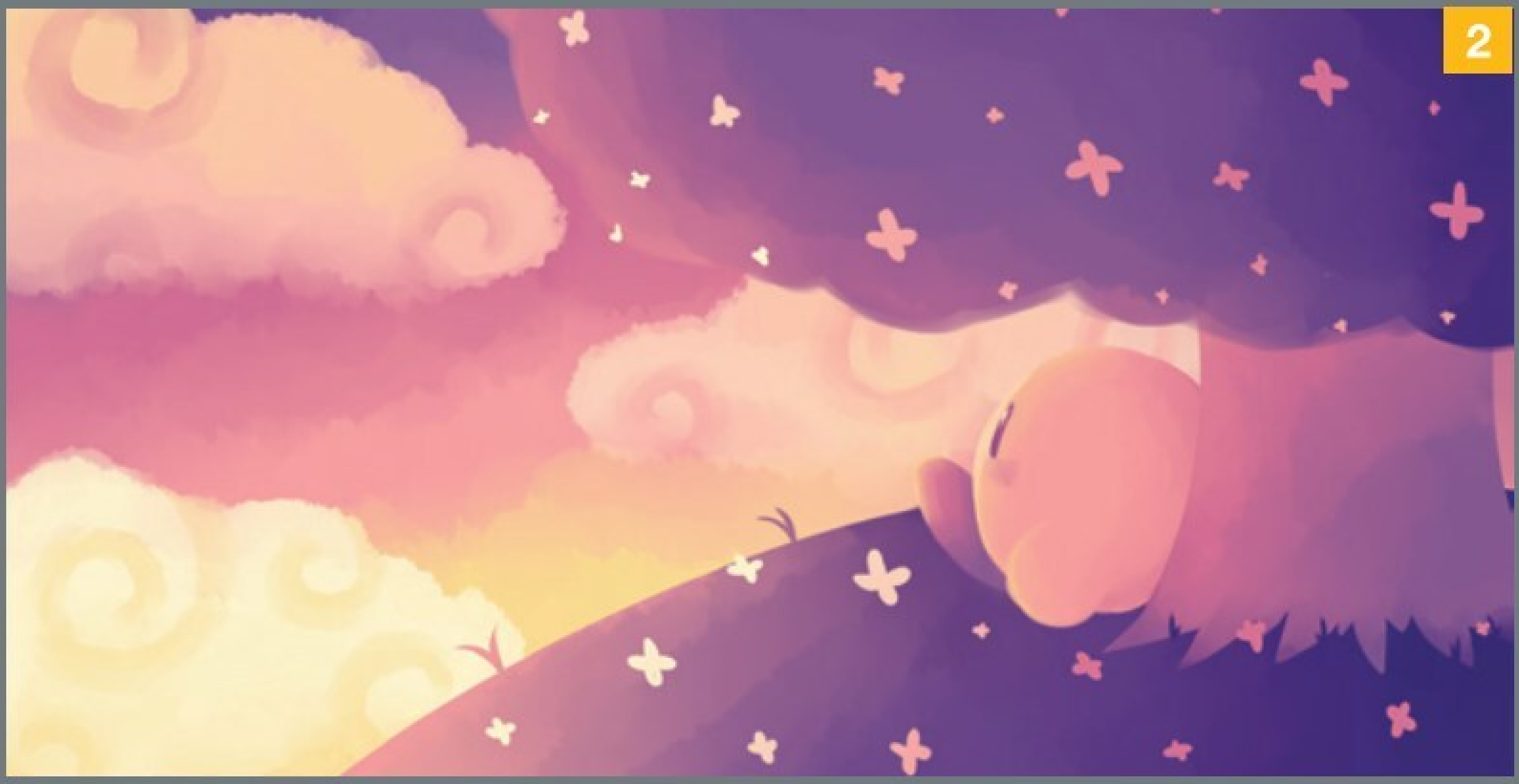
We bet Kirby is silently contemplating all the creatures he's eaten and sapped of their power. What an adorable monster.

3 Megann and Emily Gillespie

Admit it, you'd be crying too if you came in third to Toad and Jigglypuff.

4 Chloe Cole

We don't get a lot of hand-painted reader art, but it certainly fits for Okami!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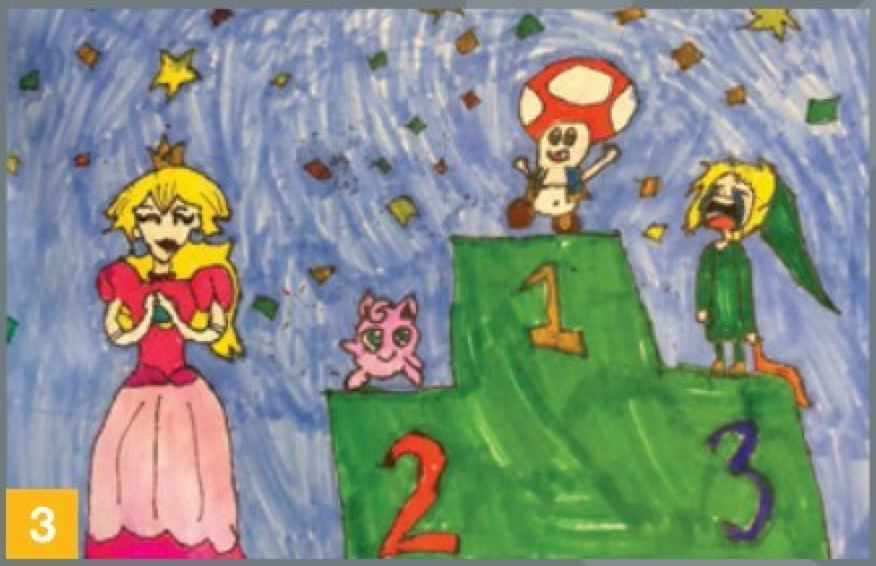
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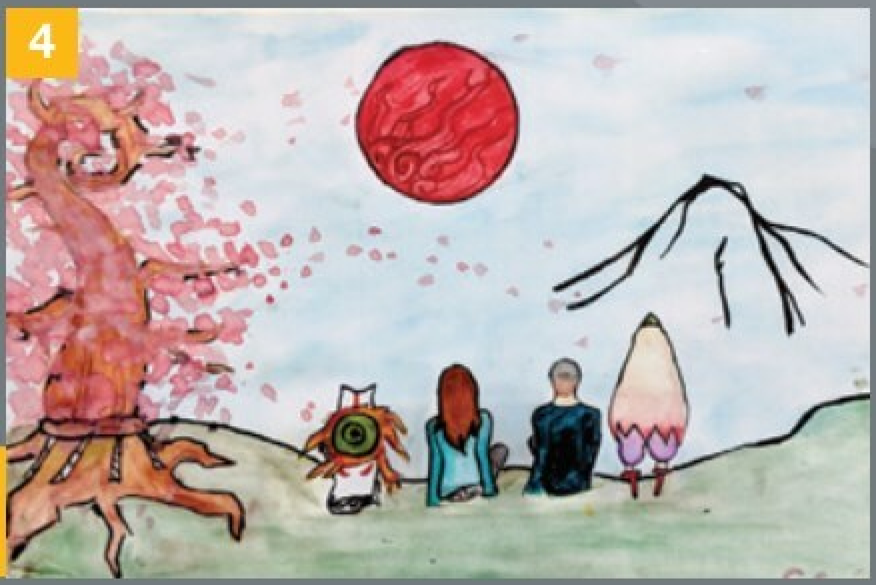
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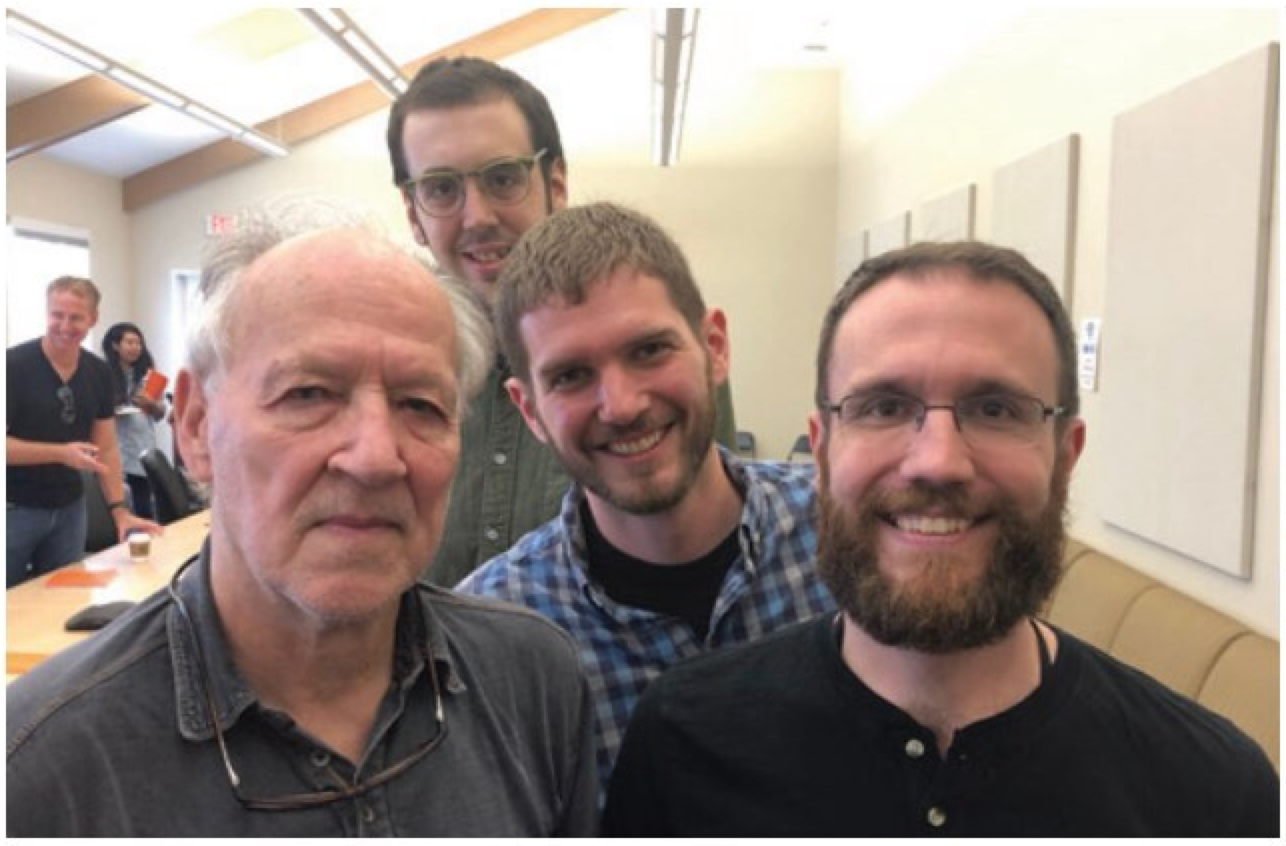

(Left) Our strangest E3 encounter? That would be legendary film director Werner Herzog, who was being tortured by Giant Bomb's Ben Pack and Dan Ryckert for some reason. **(Right)** This year Reiner brought the whole family to Pokémon Go Fest, while meeting up with Fortyseven Communications' Chase Colasonno for some outdoor fun.

connect

photo: Entertainment Software Association

E3 2019

WE KNEW GOING INTO E3 THIS YEAR the show would be different. Sony chose to skip it altogether, joining Blizzard, Rockstar, and other major game companies on the sidelines for the industry's biggest moment.

PlayStation's absence was felt well beyond its lineup of upcoming games like The Last of Us Part II, Death Stranding, and Ghosts of Tsushima; its giant booth was replaced by a less glamorous collection of smaller-tier publishers. E3's attendance also dropped, with the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) reporting this year's show had 66,100 attendees, compared to 69,000 the year before. The silver lining was consumers could move around the show more easily, and lines were generally shorter for hands-on demos.

E3's slow transformation continued from trade show to consumer event, with many publishers trimming their lineups to a few notable games and providing exclusive merchandise at their booths. Though the number of games may have dwindled compared to past shows, plenty of showstoppers still littered the floor. Nintendo charmed fans with The Legend of Zelda: Link's Awakening and Pokémon Sword & Shield. CD Projekt Red set up at the Warner Bros. booth so fans could see the red-hot Cyberpunk 2077 in action. Square Enix brought along the much-anticipated Final Fantasy VII Remake. Fan-favorite Borderlands 3 also won over the crowd with 100 gaming stations set up to satisfy fans' passionate demand, making it possible for more people to play the next entry in the Gearbox series.

Across from the convention center, Microsoft set up an Xbox showcase while the E3 Coliseum hosted developer panels. Once again, Electronic Arts hosted its EA Play fan festival across town in Hollywood during the weekend before the actual show opened its doors.

This fracture of no-shows and off-site events points to an uncertain future. E3 would certainly be more attractive if everyone was on the same page and integrated into the same shared space. But what matters most is the games, and if E3 2019 is any indication, the volatile industry finds itself in a healthy place as we brace for the next-gen consoles and streaming platforms to launch in the near future. Read on to get a comprehensive overview of the biggest news coming out of this year's show, including details on the next-gen Xbox console, Project Scarlett.

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E3 AT A GLANCE

ALL THE NEWS YOU NEED TO KNOW COMING OUT OF THE INDUSTRY'S BIGGEST SHOWCASE

Forget our usual platform report cards – with so much of E3 no longer happening on a traditional press-conference stage, we decided to take a new look at the show this year. From the exciting surprises and disappointing omissions to intriguing trends and confusing calls, these are the moments that defined E3 2019.

by Jeff Marchiafava

(Photo by Casey Rodgers/Invision for Xbox/AP Images)

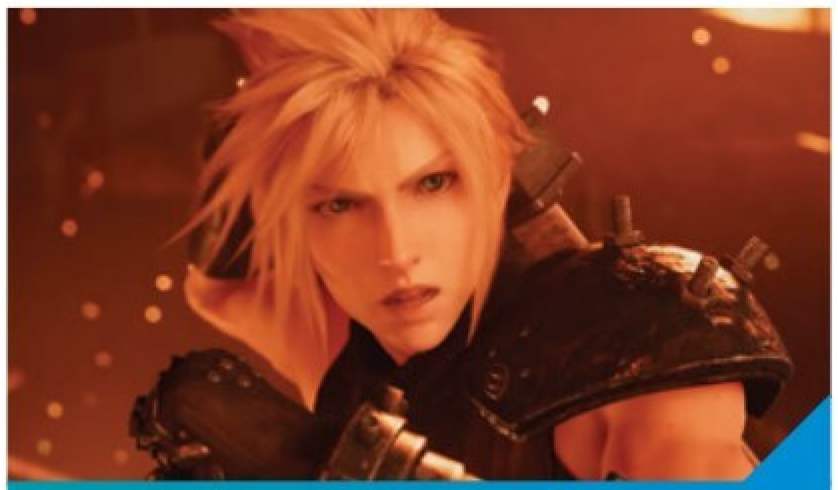
KEANU KILLS IT

"Who won E3?" is always a popular question after the dust settles on the annual expo, and the answer is usually Microsoft, Sony, or Nintendo. This year, however, a new contender clearly stole the show: Keanu Reeves. The A-list actor/assassin/time-traveling musician took the stage at Microsoft's press conference to introduce Cyberpunk 2077, and his playful (and at times irreverent) banter had the crowd going wild. Keeping his E3 appearance a secret was an accomplishment in its own right, but the revelation that Keanu plays a major role in Cyberpunk 2077 only helped build more hype for what was already destined to be the hottest game of the show. Kudos to CD Projekt Red for pulling off the surprise.

(Photo by PUBG n8bit)

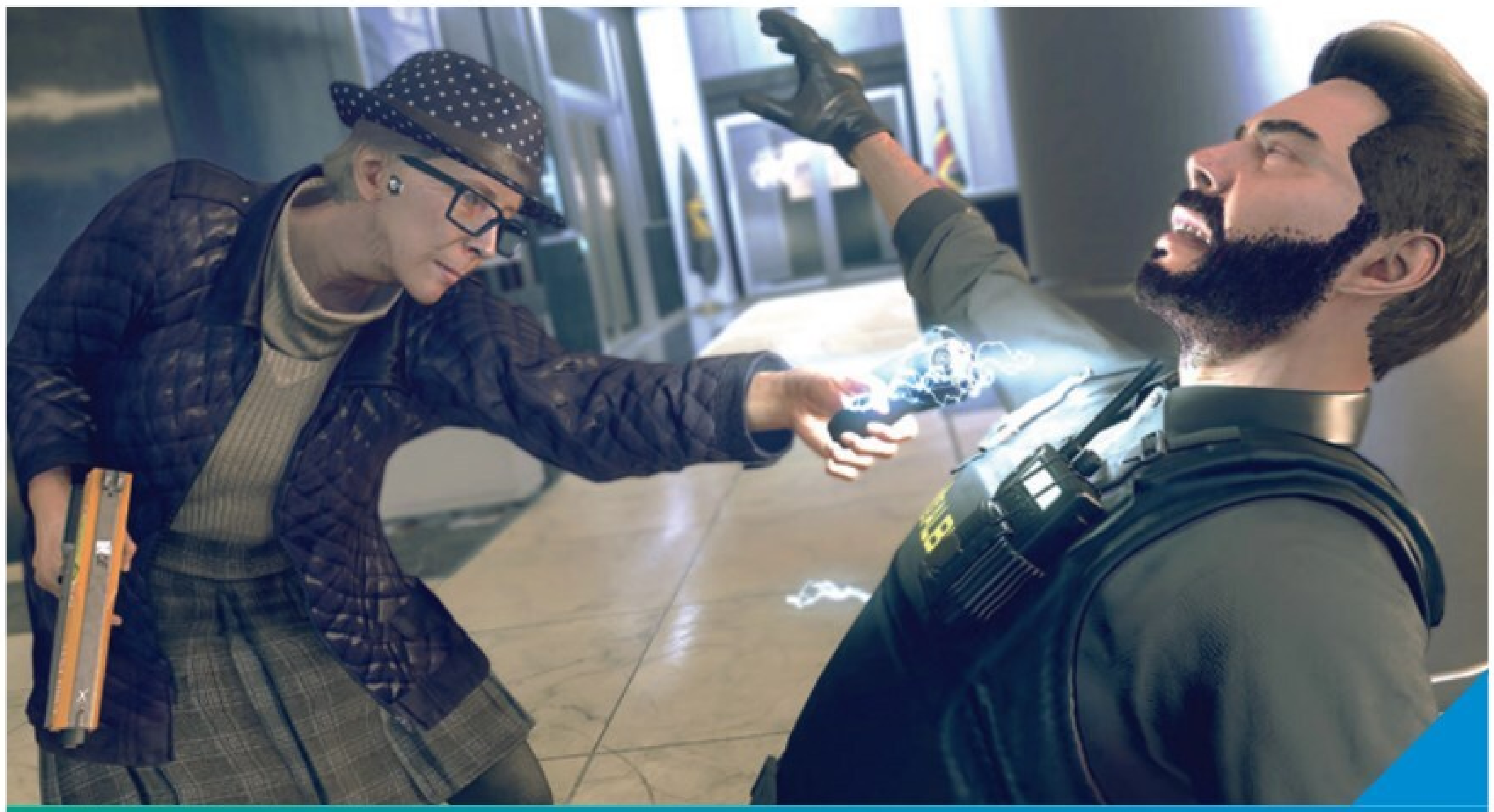
DR. DISRESPECT STREAMS HIMSELF OUT OF E3

Herschel Beahm IV, better known to his fans as Dr. Disrespect, made his first live appearance at E3 this year, and it could have gone better. The trouble started when the livestreamer broadcasted himself entering and using a public restroom inside the Los Angeles Convention Center, catching other bathroom-goers on camera without their consent – an act which by all accounts is a misdemeanor in the state of California. The ill-advised stunt got Beahm banned from Twitch and his E3 press badge revoked by the ESA. At least it taught his viewers a valuable lesson: Some streams aren't meant for the internet.



REDEMPTION FOR SQUARE ENIX

Square Enix has been taking its sweet time with Final Fantasy VII Remake, and given fans' sky-high expectations for the venerated RPG, the developer seemed to have a recipe for disaster on its hands. Any underlying fears the gaming community had were instantly shattered when Square unveiled a lengthy gameplay demo to its feverish live audience. Not only did Final Fantasy VII Remake deliver, but a billion other Final Fantasy-related announcements and JRPG demos kept fans riding high during Square Enix's conference. The reaction to Crystal Dynamics' Avengers game was a little mixed, but when your iffiest title has "Marvel" in its name, you know you've got a solid lineup on your hands.



UBISOFT'S SECRET WEAPONS: DOGS AND GRANNIES

Despite announcing Ghost Recon Breakpoint and Watch Dogs Legion before E3, Ubisoft still had some unconventional surprises for the show. The first happened when actor Jon Bernthal (*The Walking Dead*, *Marvel's The Punisher*) took the stage to talk about his role in Ghost Recon, along with a special guest: his surprisingly chill dog Bam Bam, who paid no mind to the hooting and hollering audience. While the internet ate Bam Bam's appearance up, the bigger surprise came from Watch Dogs Legion, which revealed you can recruit and play as any character in the game, including little old ladies. The stage demo featured an extended segment where a retired granny named Helen Dashwood shuffled, hacked, and shot her way through a mission at a geriatric pace, under threat of permadeath. It was a strange but intriguing twist for a deeply ambitious game.

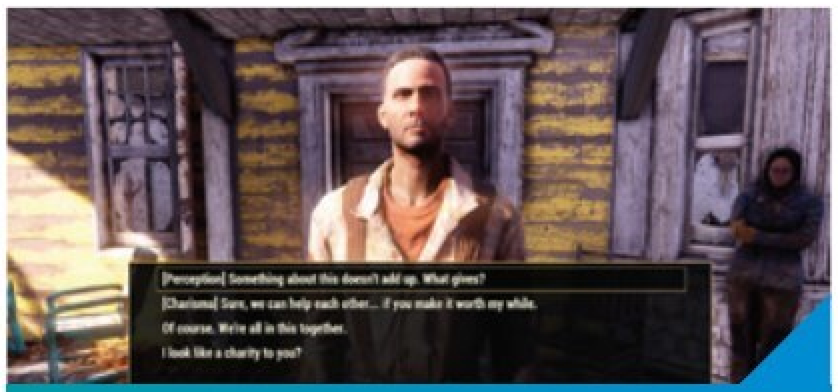
OFF-BRAND AVENGERS?

Crystal Dynamics' Avengers project was one of the biggest talking points heading into E3, but the long-awaited reveal wasn't quite what some fans expected. Despite the wallet-busting licensing complications, few considered the possibility that Marvel's Avengers wouldn't feature the likenesses of the actors and actresses who play our favorite heroes on the silver screen. Instead, Crystal Dynamics is crafting its own story and take on the characters, which in the long run is better than rehashing the movies. That fact didn't stem the tide of savage digs at the dubious character designs shown in the reveal, however, especially Thor's horrendous Bethesda-beard. Avengers, reassemble! Preferably into other people.

(Photo by Casey Rodgers/Invision for Xbox/AP Images)

MICROSOFT GETS DOUBLE FINED

Being an independent developer is hard – especially when your main specialty is quirky and comedic adventure games. That's why we breathed a collective sigh of relief when Microsoft announced it had purchased Double Fine. Sure, it's sad to see yet another indie studio get bought out by a major publisher, but Double Fine seems like a perfect fit for Microsoft's trend of buying largely self-sufficient developers. If Microsoft gives Tim Schafer and company the leeway to keep doing what they do best, then the acquisition is a win-win for everybody. In case you're worried: Psychonauts 2 will still be coming out for PlayStation 4, as previously announced.


[Perception] Something about this doesn't add up. What gives?
[Charisma] Sure, we can help each other... if you make it worth my while.
Of course. We're all in this together.
I look like a charity to you?

FALLOUT 76 MAKES DRASTIC CHANGES

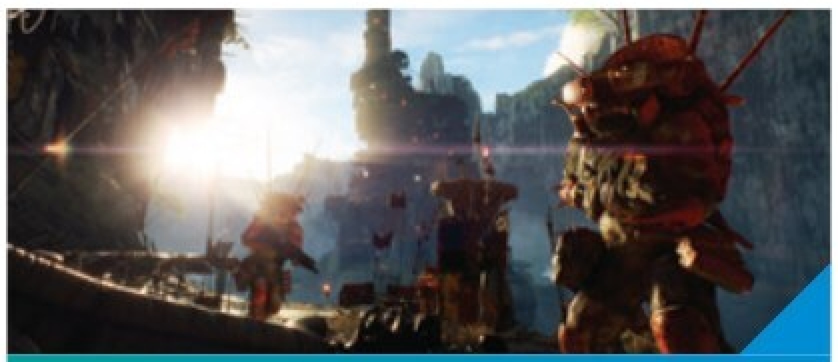
We're still getting angry emails over Fallout 76, but Bethesda has clearly heard the criticisms as well. In addition to acknowledging the game's rough launch during its stage presentation, Bethesda announced a slew of fan-driven changes coming in the next update, including an all-new main quest, human NPCs with dialogue trees, player choices with lasting consequences, and a host of new weapons and gear. On the other end of the spectrum, Bethesda added a trend-chasing 52-player battle royale mode to the game called Nuclear Winter, which has contestants fighting over control of Vault 51. Both updates are free to Fallout 76 players.

SCREAMING IDIOTS

Dear audience attendees: No one is watching E3 press conferences to hear you interrupt the presenters with your manic yelling. They are watching to learn about video games, which you are actively delaying. Save your inappropriate outburst for your next court hearing, and let us learn about the new Elder Scrolls Blades update in the stony silence the game deserves.

NAKAMURA FEVER

Alright, we'll make one exception to the whole "no shouting during press conference speeches" rule, and that's if it involves cheering on Tango Gameworks creative director Ikumi Nakamura. In a year full of snooze-inducing E3 speeches, Nakamura's enthusiastic and lighthearted introduction to Ghostwire: Tokyo stood out as a breath of fresh air, and earned her an instant cult following online. It's one she deserves for more than her presenting skills; Nakamura worked on Okami, Bayonetta, and The Evil Within before taking the reins on Ghostwire: Tokyo.



ANTHEM TAKES A KNEE

BioWare's sci-fi shooter didn't have the smoothest of launches, a fact EA didn't seem keen on addressing. Instead, the publisher virtually shunned the game at its EA Play event, relegating the only mention of Anthem to a short developer interview between its FIFA and Madden livestream presentations. If you missed it, that was likely the point – which doesn't exactly instill confidence in the project's future.

5 TO 9 > 9 TO 5
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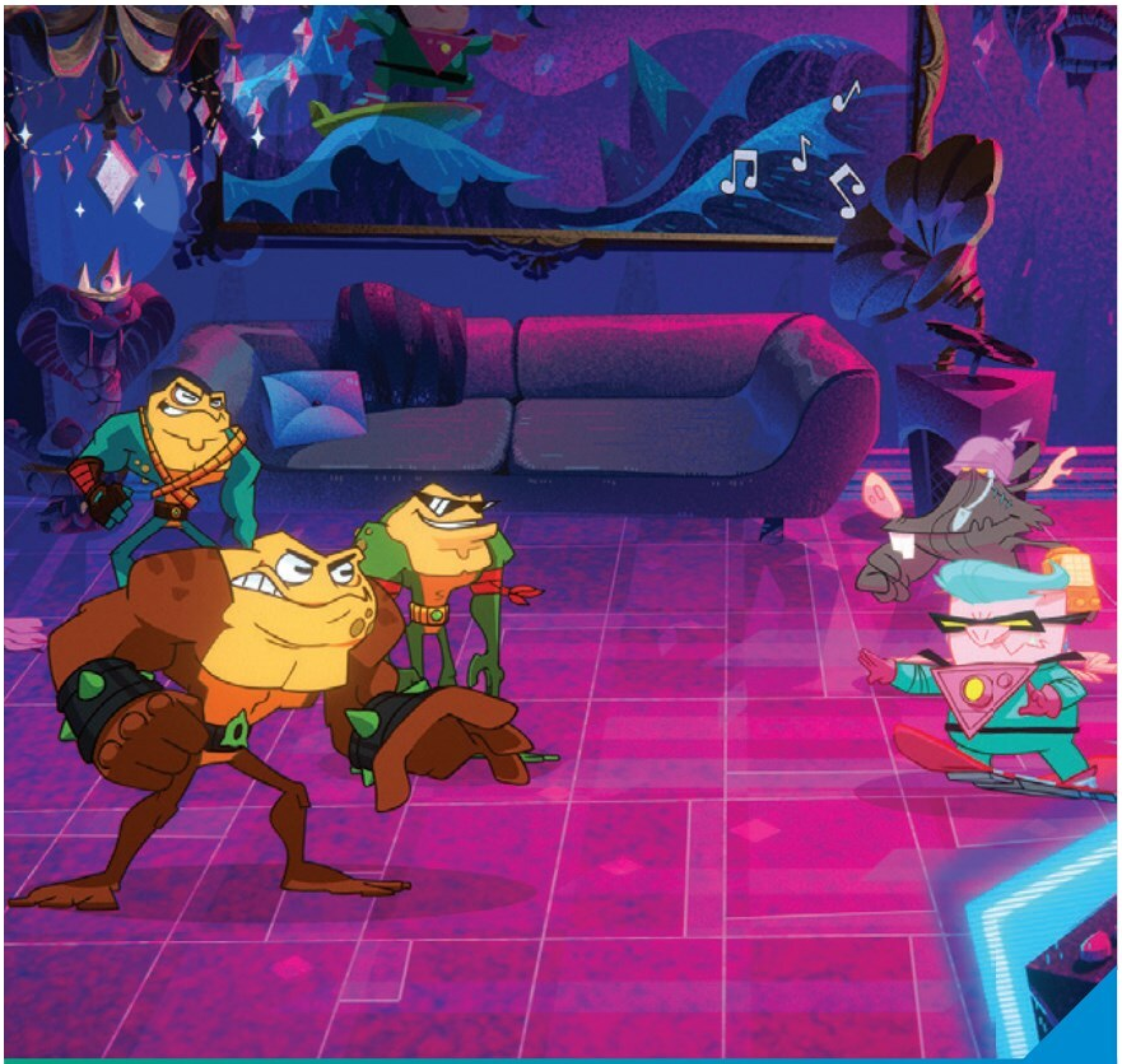
Prototype shown with options. [1]Performance tires are expected to experience greater tire wear than conventional tires. Tire life may be less than 24,000 miles, depending upon driving conditions. ©2019 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.

VR STALLS OUT AGAIN

Every time it seems like virtual reality starts gaining momentum, it hits another speedbump. VR made little more than a whimper at this year's E3, with developers failing to deliver the killer app the technology still needs to find mainstream success. Part of the lack of VR titles can be attributed to Sony's absence from the show, as it's still the only console maker taking VR seriously at the moment (sorry, Labo VR fans). Either way, those holding onto hope that VR is more than a fad didn't have a lot to get excited about at this year's show.

MICROSOFT STILL PLAYING CATCH-UP

With Sony out of the picture, Microsoft had the biggest showing and most games at this year's E3. While big third-party titles like Cyberpunk 2077, Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order, and Borderlands 3 helped flesh out Microsoft's press conference, the publisher was still lagging on the first-party front. Its biggest upcoming games, Gears 5 and Halo Infinite, were both relegated to cinematic trailers during its press conference. While other titles like Ori and the Will of the Wisps, Minecraft Dungeons, and Flight Simulator look fun, they aren't exactly game changers. Hopefully Microsoft's studio acquisitions start paying off sooner rather than later. Ninja Theory's Bleeding Edge brawler looks like a promising start, and we're still hoping the pre-show Fable IV rumors come to fruition at some point.



8-BIT BOMBS

Sometimes nostalgia isn't enough. Three classic gaming franchises – Contra, Battletoads, and Commander Keen – were all resurrected at this year's show, and we're still trying to figure out why. After years of Phil Spencer's wardrobe teases, we finally got the full reveal of Battletoads, but the ho-hum action felt more more like a web-browser game than a modern beat-'em-up. Contra's transition to low-poly 3D action is most certainly not what franchise fans wanted, and does anyone really care enough about Commander Keen to lament its move to mobile?

LIKE AND SUBSCRIBE

One area where Microsoft killed it: Convincing players that its Game Pass is worth the price of admission. Many of the games Microsoft showed during its press conference, including some third-party titles like The Outer Worlds, were advertised as being included in Game Pass at launch. Microsoft further sweetened the deal by announcing Game Pass Ultimate, which includes full access to the Game Pass library on PC and console, and also bundles Xbox Live Gold for online play for just $15 a month. Meanwhile, Ubisoft announced its own Uplay+ service for PC, which offers virtually all of the publisher's games, expansions, and DLC for the same monthly price.

THE ESA HAS WORK TO DO

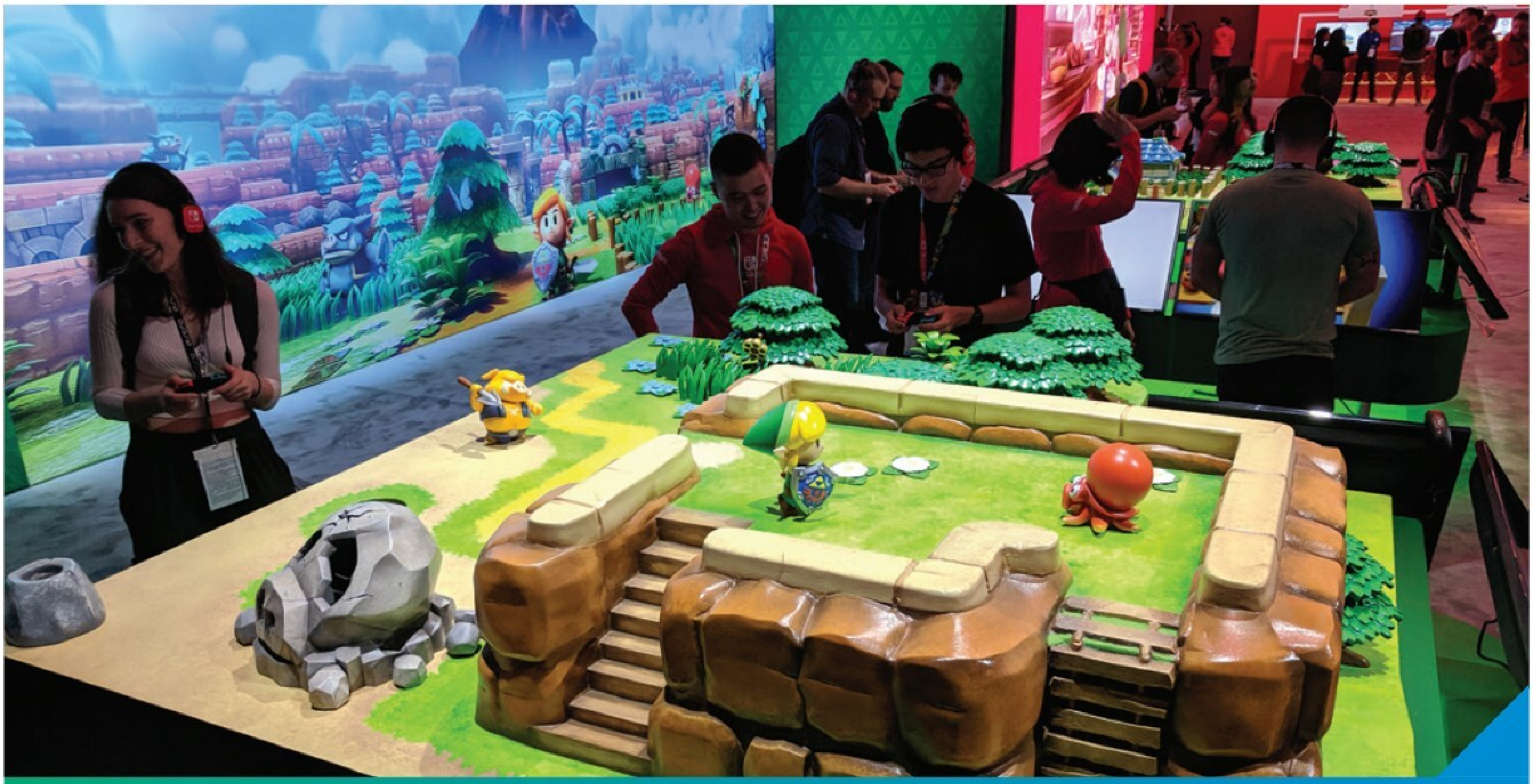
Opening E3 to the public has been a boon for the show, but it won't matter much if publishers stop showing up. While some companies like Rockstar have been too cool for school for a while now, this year both Sony and Activision deemed the annual expo show floor skippable as well, and EA again held its own off-site festivities. As a result, the show floor was the weakest it's been in recent memory, both in terms of big titles to play and actual booths to peruse. Attendance also suffered, capping out at 66,100, a few thousand less than the totals in 2018 and 2017. The job of enticing publishers back falls squarely on the ESA, and it's time for the organization to examine what it wants and expects out of the show.

A DEARTH OF DEMOS

You can't judge a book by its cover, and you can't judge a game by its flashy CG cinematics. That last tenet seems to have eluded most publishers, however, as this year's E3 had more trailers than a tailgate party. New IP announcements like Deathloop, Outriders, and the From Software/George R.R. Martin collaboration Elden Ring gave viewers little to go on besides evocative, pre-rendered imagery. On the other hand, the few titles that did feature hefty gameplay demos, including Cyberpunk 2077, Final Fantasy VII Remake, and Watch Dogs Legion, garnered significant buzz from E3 attendees all week long. So maybe do more of that next year?

A DIFFERENT KIND OF EXCLUSIVE

One fun addition to this year's show: More companies were selling exclusive collectibles on the showfloor, bringing E3 in line with other consumer conventions like Comic-Con and PAX. While not everyone attending E3 may be interested in buying Funko Pops or other tchotchkes, they certainly make better souvenirs than a half-eaten food-truck burrito.



NINTENDO DOES E3 RIGHT

Nintendo stopped holding live press conferences years ago, but the company knows how to decorate an E3 booth – or three, as it turned out this year. Nintendo delighted its long lines of adoring fans with three distinct experiences based on its lineup: A Link's Awakening area filled with adorable 3D dioramas inspired by the upcoming remake; a spooky hotel themed after Luigi's Mansion 3; and a water gym for Pokémon Sword and Shield trainers to throw down in. Toss in some big reveals for a Breath of the Wild sequel and Banjo-Kazooie joining Super Smash Bros. Ultimate, and Nintendo reminded us all what E3 should be: a fun, family-friendly spectacle that celebrates video games in all their forms. ◆

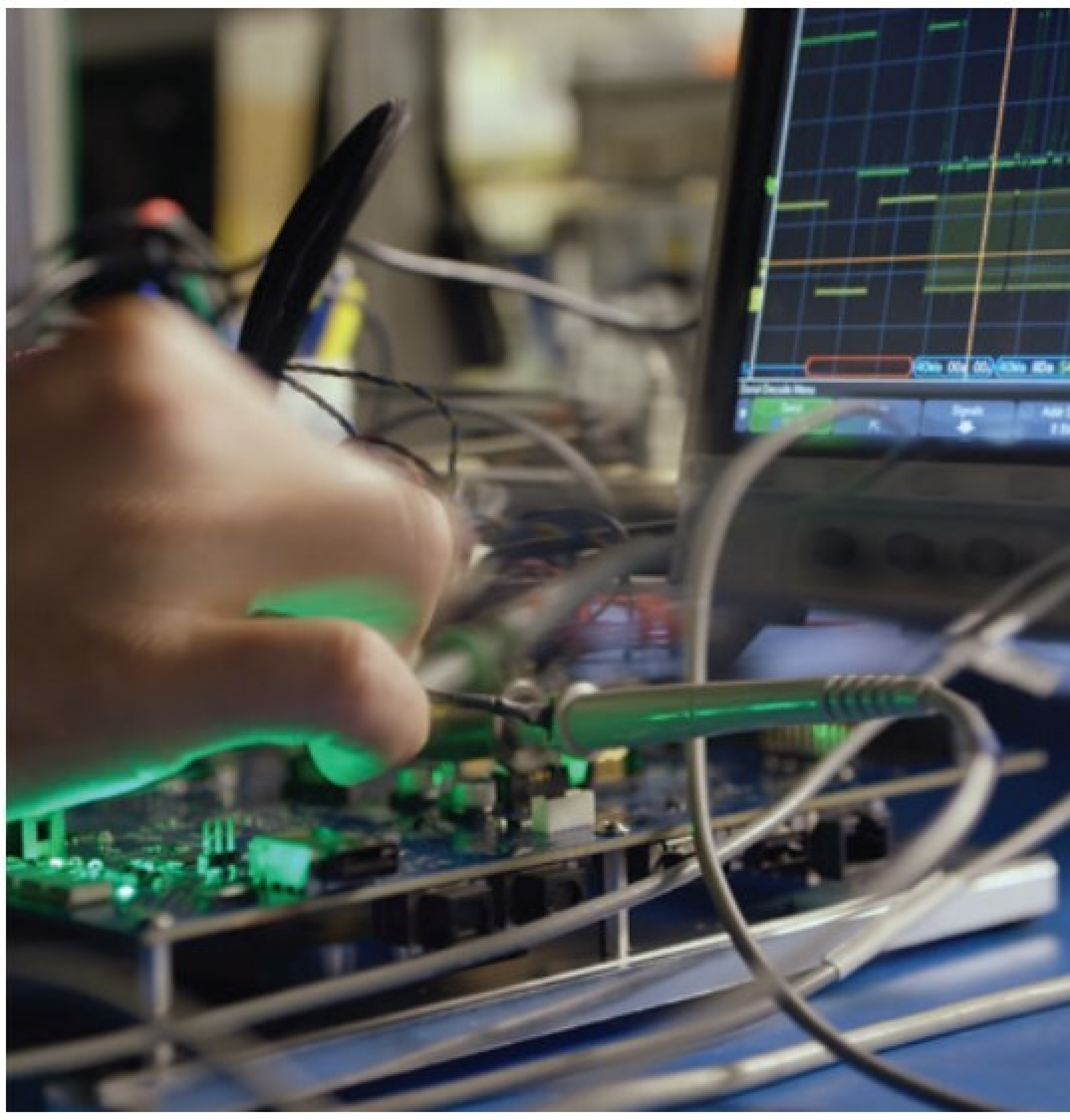
E3 2019

INTRODUCING PROJECT SCARLETT

MICROSOFT REVEALS MORE NITTY-GRITTY DETAILS ABOUT ITS NEXT-GEN CONSOLE

During the Microsoft briefing at E3 2018, Xbox head Phil Spencer hinted at the company's next-gen system, saying the hardware team was already hard at work on a new console. This year's press briefing built on that promise with information on the next Xbox, codenamed Project Scarlett.

by Brian Shea



You may recall how the initial Xbox One reveal was infamously focused on apps and entertainment. Microsoft took a 180-degree approach with the first details of Project Scarlett. "We heard you. A console should be designed, and built, and optimized for one thing and one thing only: gaming," Spencer said to the cheers of the audience.

The hardware sounds exciting and somewhat implausible, with buzz terms like 8K resolution, 120 frames-per-second, as well as variable refresh rate and hardware-accelerated ray tracing.

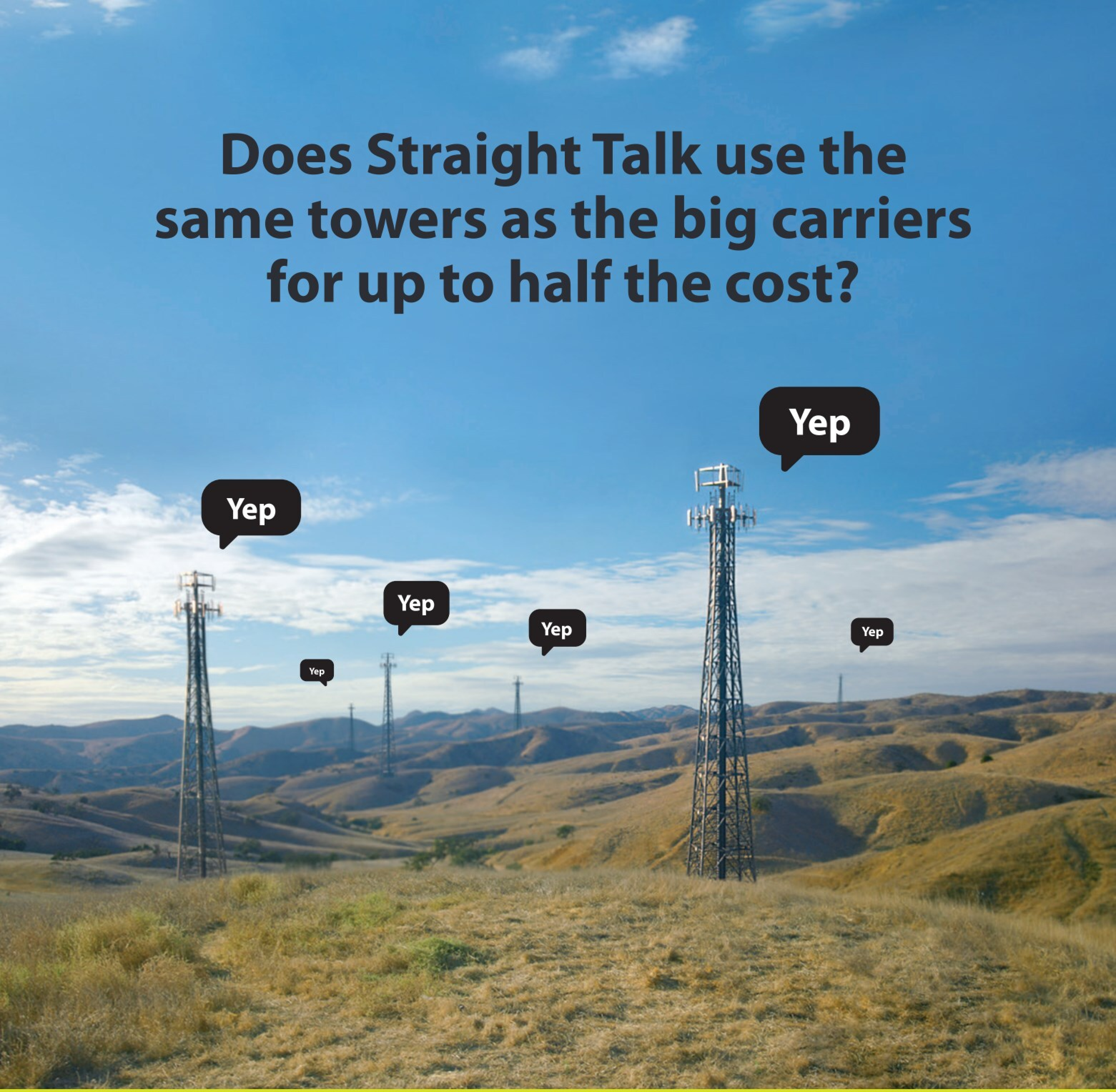
Project Scarlett features a custom-designed AMD processor with chipsets based on Zen 2 and Navi architecture. Spencer says the console's processing capabilities are four times as powerful as the Xbox One X, the current most-powerful console on the market. It also uses high-bandwidth GDDR6 to optimize performance. "This generation is going to be a bigger leap than any generation we've done before," said Xbox corporate vice president Mike Ybarra.

Like the next-gen PlayStation, Project Scarlett features a solid-state drive, which boosts performance with an eye toward greatly reducing load times. Microsoft is also leveraging the SSD to use as virtual RAM, which, according to Microsoft, yields up to a 40-time performance increase over current-generation hardware.

On top of impressive specifications, Microsoft emphasized the ability to play across multiple devices and platforms using its new cloud system, xCloud. In addition, Project Scarlett is backward-compatible with Xbox One games and accessories, and can access Xbox's ever-growing GamePass catalog. Existing achievements and progression also carry over. Digital games will undoubtedly play a huge role in all next-gen hardware, but physical-media loyalists need not fear: The next Xbox console houses a disc drive.

Microsoft didn't show any software running on Project Scarlett, but revealed that Halo: Infinite will be a launch title.

While the information we learned about Xbox's next console is intriguing, Microsoft stopped short of sharing a glimpse of the physical unit. That said, we know it's coming during the holiday 2020 window, so more details will surface in the coming months. ◆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THE GAME STREAMING REPORT

THE STADIA AND PROJECT XCLOUD PLATFORMS COME FURTHER INTO FOCUS

The idea of playing any video game on any platform over the internet without the need for downloading a game or owning an expensive box is an undeniably attractive proposition. Unfortunately, it's a proposition rife with questions and uncertainty, as we outlined last month. E3 gave us the chance to try out these services in controlled environments, and while we still have plenty of questions about the potential of a game-streaming future, we are starting to get a better idea of what these services offer.

by Kyle Hilliard

Stadia Shows Its Hand

Google held an online conference prior to E3, revealing the Stadia pricing and release window. Early adopters can sign up for the Founders Edition starter kit for $129, which launches in November, with a Stadia controller, a Chromecast Ultra, a copy of Destiny 2, a three-month buddy pass so you can give Stadia Pro to a friend, and a three-month Stadia Pro subscription.

The base subscription to Stadia, which has no monthly fee, will let players stream their purchased games at 1080p/60 fps with stereo sound. Stadia Pro costs $9.99 a month and allows subscribers to stream games at 4K/60 fps with HDR and 5.1 surround sound. Regardless of subscription tier, games must be purchased individually, but Pro subscriptions offers discounts and periodic free games. Stadia controllers can be bought separately for $69.99.

The information outlined above is all nice, but none of it matters if the service doesn't work. We got to test Doom Eternal at E3 and were generally impressed, though we encountered occasional latency.

Playing Project xCloud

We have fewer details on Microsoft's streaming service, but we know it allows you to stream remotely to various platforms. We don't know when the service will launch, how much it will cost, or if it will be integrated into Xbox Live Gold, among other details, but Microsoft said public tests will start around October.

For our hands-on we played over Wi-Fi on a phone using Xbox One controllers. The servers for the games were based in the Bay Area, while we were playing in Los Angeles. We played Gears of War 4, Resident Evil 7, Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, and Forza Horizon 4. Like Stadia, we were generally impressed with how most of the games ran and were able to do things like Gears' active reload without too much issue. With Forza, on the other hand, we experienced latency that hindered the sense of speed and made the cars feel sluggish.

Is Streaming The Future?

Unfortunately, it's a question we won't be able to answer with confidence until we're months into these streaming services being publicly available. Right now, between the two and based on our hands-on time with them, Stadia has the technical edge. It worked better at E3, but there are plenty of caveats to consider, like the fact that we don't know what kind of internet speed we had on the show floor, nor do we know the intimate details of how the demos were set up. We're optimistic about the functionality of these services for more relaxed single-player games, as they work better than we expected, but the lag could cripple multiplayer games. We're eager to try them out in real-world settings. ◆

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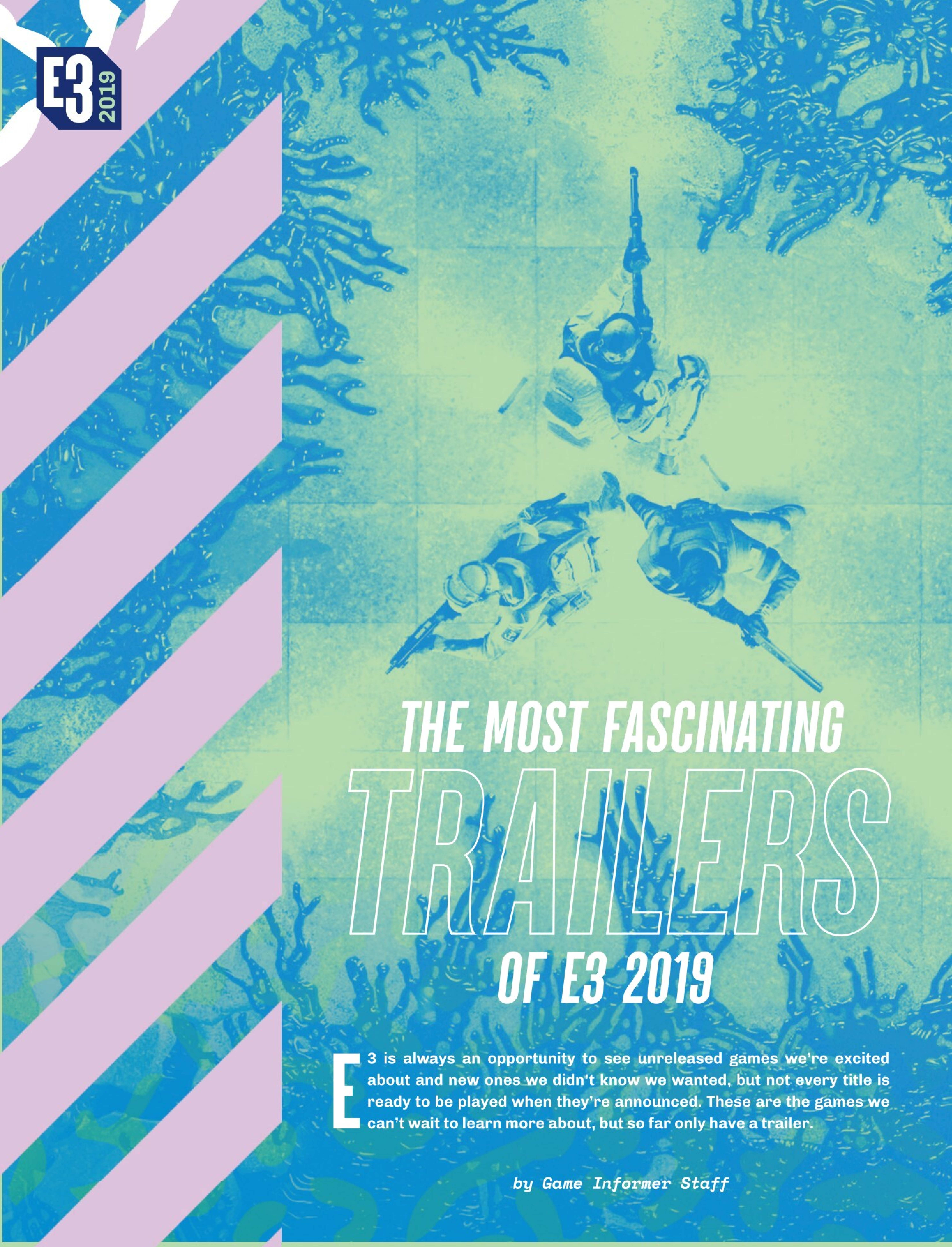


THE MOST FASCINATING TRAILERS OF E3 2019

E3 is always an opportunity to see unreleased games we're excited about and new ones we didn't know we wanted, but not every title is ready to be played when they're announced. These are the games we can't wait to learn more about, but so far only have a trailer.

by Game Informer Staff

BALDUR'S GATE III

Platform: *PC • Stadia*

Baldur's Gate is one of the most legendary and revered role-playing franchises of all time. Living up to expectations for a long-awaited sequel is a daunting task, but if any team can handle it, it's Divinity: Original Sin II developer Larian Studios. The party-based RPG tells a new story set in the age of the Forgotten Realms, and is based on the 5th Edition D&D rules. All we know about the story so far is the mind flayers have found a way to make ships that travel between worlds, and that they are invading Baldur's Gate. We haven't seen any gameplay – and don't expect it to diverge from the expected isometric classic CRPG template – but we're excited all the same.

BLAIR WITCH

Platform: *Xbox One • PC*

In a mysterious trailer that had people guessing everything from a new IP to the next Alan Wake, Layers of Fear developer Bloober Team surprised us all by returning to the outskirts of Burkittsville, where the found-footage horror genre exploded back in 1999. When Ellis and his dog help a search party look for a missing boy, they get separated from the group and lost in the Black Hills forest. Ellis' one and only "weapon" is his flashlight, which can briefly stun enemies and open up an escape route. He also has a video camera that can be used to solve puzzles by analyzing the footage. The trailer showcases a game with fertile ground for both jump-scares and atmospheric chills. Coming out in August, Blair Witch looks ready to strike fear into the hearts of players and streamers.

CROSSFIRE X

Platform: *Xbox One • PC*

CrossFire is a first-person shooter in China and South Korea that boasts the highest player count in the world, but it has yet to break into North America. CrossFire X could be the series' best opportunity to expand its popularity west. CrossFire is exclusively a multiplayer game with custom avatars, but CrossFire X adds a single-player campaign being developed by Remedy Entertainment, the studio behind Max Payne and the upcoming Control. Its trailer doesn't reveal much, but confirms that special forces men and women will shoot bullets at each other. Maybe that's all we need.

DEATHLOOP

Platform: *TBD*

The makers of Dishonored revealed a brand-new game during Bethesda's E3 2019 press conference. Deathloop features a '70s film aesthetic as a pair of expert assassins kill each other over and over in a *Groundhog Day* cycle on an island called Blackreef. One fights to maintain the loop, while the other fights to break it. The meaning of the loop and why these two assassins approach it with opposing views is unclear, but developer Arkane Lyon has proven it knows how to make interesting action games in the past.

ELDEN RING

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One*

Leaked before the show, Elden Ring is a surprise collaboration between Dark Souls/Bloodborne/Sekiro studio From Software and *Game of Thrones* author George R.R. Martin. While the CGI trailer focused more on setting the mood for this dark fantasy than hard details, director Hidetaka Miyazaki later revealed the game is set in a larger open world than other From Software games. We also know the game emphasizes RPG elements, but preserves the combat challenge and found-narrative approach of the Dark Souls games. Given Miyazaki's track record and Martin's impressive world-building skills, this game carries a ton of warranted hype, even without any gameplay on display.

FLIGHT SIMULATOR

Platform: *Xbox One • PC*

The Flight Simulator series goes back to 1982, when many PC gaming neophytes played the heck out of it, whether we were flight enthusiasts or not. It was one of the coolest games around at the time. Today, the series gets a breathtaking new entry featuring ridiculous 4K graphics and landscapes generated by two petabytes of real geographical data. This marks the first real entry in the series since 2012's Microsoft Flight, so fans of aerial wonder have a lot to be thrilled about as they shoot up through the clouds.

GHOSTWIRE: TOKYO

Platform: *TBA*

Ghostwire: Tokyo comes from Resident Evil 4 director Shinji Mikami's Tango Gameworks studio. The horror master introduced the title as "an action-adventure game in which you'll fight paranormal enemies and rid the city of supernatural evil." The trailer begins showing a bustling Tokyo, when suddenly its citizens start evaporating into thin air while abstract visuals, like a bowl of ramen and a series of torii gates, merge into one another. A strange ninja appears at the end to say, "Don't fear the unknown. Attack it." Creative director Ikumi Nakamura, who stole the show during the Bethesda press conference with her infectious personality, promises the game will be "spooky," but she also said this isn't a survival game like The Evil Within. We're excited to learn more.

GYLT

Platform: *Stadia*

In this Stadia exclusive, Tequila Works mixes the charming and the horrific, with a Pixar-esque graphical style and darkness around every corner. Players take control of a young girl named Sally, who must search for her cousin Emily in a desolate world filled with nightmarish creatures. Tequila works says Gylt is a "journey where you face your worst fears and are confronted with the emotional impact of your actions." The trailer suggests this is a stealth game with light puzzle elements, as confronting these wicked monsters head-on seems like a fool's errand. We're intrigued and can't wait to find out more about what's lurking in the dark.

HALO INFINITE

Platform: *Project Scarlett • Xbox One • PC*

Teased in 2018 with a series of environmental shots of an alien planet, Halo Infinite's E3 2019 presence offered a little bit more story. A UNSC soldier has been stuck for months on a ship in space when he happens to come across a seemingly dead Master Chief. A reboot thankfully brings him online and we see a shot of a broken Halo ring as the series' signature percussion soundtrack kicks in. It ultimately left us wanting more, but it is nice to see a Master Chief waking from cryosleep and preparing to fight all over again.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: BREATH OF THE WILD 2 [WORKING TITLE]

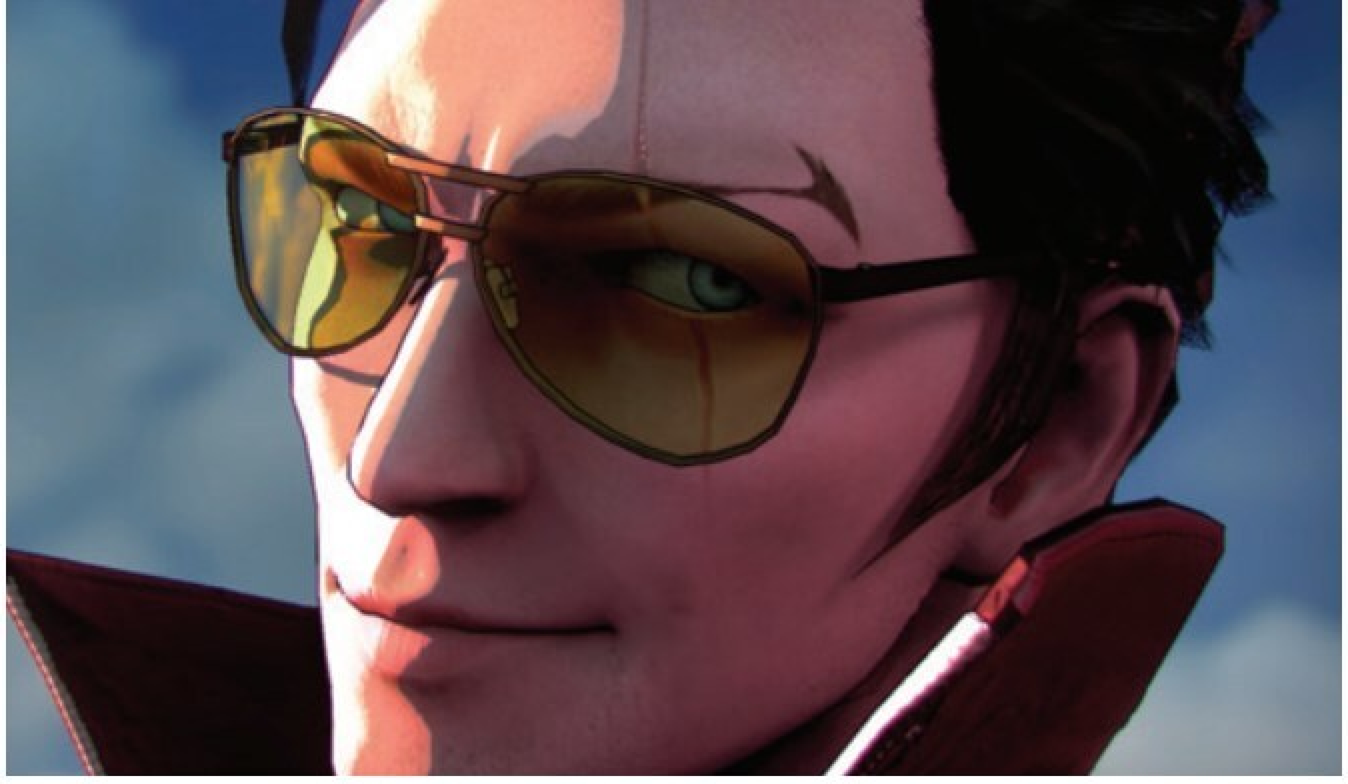
Platform: *Switch*

Arguably one of the biggest surprises of E3, not only is The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild getting a direct sequel, but Nintendo had footage of the game to show off. Link and Zelda are exploring an underground cave when they encounter a mummified creature many are speculating is Ganondorf. Something goes wrong and the corpse comes to life, unleashing an evil that causes Hyrule castle to rise toward the sky. The tone looks much darker than the original, and Zelda's role looks to be expanded. We have nothing but questions right now, but we're intrigued by what we saw.

NO MORE HEROES III

***Platform:** Switch*

If you've been waiting forever (okay, since 2010) for the next mainline Travis Touchdown experience, the long wait is over. Suda51 and Grasshopper Manufacture are bringing the bizarre antihero assassin back for another rampage in this Switch exclusive. No More Heroes III expands the scope of the series (you're fighting aliens instead of other assassins), but keeps the part-time jobs and overall structure intact. Beam katanas and wrestling moves combine to create the signature wackiness we expect, and honestly, we can't wait to get weird with it.



OUTRIDERS

***Platform:** PS4 • Xbox One • PC*

After making Bulletstorm and supporting the early years of Fortnite, Polish development studio People Can Fly left Epic and is finally getting another chance to craft an original game. Creative director Bartosz Kmita describes Outriders as a "dark modern shooter built with traditional values," and says the story is an important focus. The three-player cooperative, third-person sci-fi shooter has serious Destiny vibes, but also veers into the horrific with scary alien creatures and gigantic monster designs that harken back to the studios' Painkiller days. The game comes out in summer 2020, so we should know more about it soon.

RAINBOW SIX QUARANTINE

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC*

Building off the popular Rainbow Six Siege “Outbreak” event, Ubisoft Montreal is developing a full online PvE experience that pits three operators against a legion of humans infected by a mutating alien parasite. Ubi says players “risk everything” each time they step into the Quarantine, which hints toward some sort of permadeath system. The trailer didn’t reveal too many gameplay features, but Quarantine is scheduled to launch in early 2020.

TALES OF ARISE

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC*

The long-running Tales franchise is getting a reinvention to entice a modern generation of gamers but isn't abandoning the things that made the series popular in the first place. Expect the anime-inspired visuals and flashy action combat that have come to define the series, but this entry is being built solely for modern hardware, giving it a much-needed visual improvement. The story follows a volatile relationship between two neighboring planets, Dahna and Rena. Rena has ruled over Dahna for 300 years, but a man and a woman from the two competing planets must work together to enact change. Details are still slim, but Arise looks to be a blend of old and new ideas. ◆

A Massive Success

Since it joined Ubisoft in 2008, Massive Entertainment has grown massively from its roots as a small studio making real-time strategy games. We talked with managing director David Polfeldt about the challenges of making live-services games like The Division and working alongside Hollywood's brightest stars on The Avatar Project.

Before The Division, Massive was primarily known for making real-time strategy games like Ground Control and World in Conflict. How did you get Ubisoft to sign off on making a live-service looter shooter?
One thing that isn't well known is that just before Ubisoft acquired Massive, we were waiting for the antitrust bureaus in both the U.S. and EU to approve the merger between the Vivendi and Activision. During that time, Massive embarked on a lot of R&D that wasn't public-facing in any way.

We explored a couple of technology ideas that we had, which became the seed of Snowdrop the game engine. We also explored a first-person shooter prototype that we called Storm highly inspired by other first-person shooters that were big at the time. We also embarked on a big IP project, because we wanted to think of World in Conflict as the foundation for a big IP rather than just an RTS game. Because we had a fair amount of time, we really spread our wings on that, which was called Project Coal.

A lot of the R&D we did in that year helped us with Ubisoft, especially in the first couple of years. When Ubisoft saw our first-person prototype, they knew we were capable of building something interesting in that genre. When you talk about Snowdrop, it's incredibly hard to get any publisher to accept the cost of funding a new game engine, but we had seeds of technology and tools and workable code that proved some of the efficiency and some of the rendering theories that we had regarding software. We tried not to convince them so much with words, but with tangible software that they could test and evaluate.

interview by Matt Bertz

The most resonant narrative coming out of The Division was the turnaround born out of Massive synthesizing fan feedback and fixing what needed fixing. We see live service games struggle with this all the time, the most recent example being Anthem. What efforts behind the scenes led to that success story?
I would say it's a Darwinist outcome of being in that development cycle. Learning by failing, unfortunately, was necessary. But that taught us some good lessons, and then learning by succeeding as well. But during that period, what you see is that some people on the dev team turn out to have good instincts, or turn out to be more often right than wrong when they make very early assumptions or throw out very early ideas. Those people get to have more of an influence over the live game than others. We have a lot of smart people, but that doesn't mean smart people understand every topic. I think the influence over what we did on the live side gravitated away from some people and toward others who were better attuned to developing games in that manner, who were comfortable taking onboard a lot of fan feedback, actually reading what's on Reddit without getting personally hurt, and finding the jewels in that feedback. Some people see that more as a Sherlock Holmes project, where I'm going to read this, and I'm going to find something valuable in it.

The Division 2 had a relatively stable launch. What's next?
In general, we would like to understand the community even better than we do already. If you look at The Division 1, I think it took us six months until we were getting into a rock-solid relationship with gamers who played the game. Part of what we're doing today is still a reflection of assumptions we made before the game shipped. Over the next couple of months, we will have fewer and fewer parts of the dev cycle based on assumptions that were made before launch. The entire dev cycle will be based on things we have learned since launch. I think there are parts of what we're doing today that I would like to feel more confident about. But we'll see. We have a really, really talented team.

How involved is James Cameron in The Avatar Project development? Is he a pretty hands-on partner, or is he largely trusting your group to execute the vision the two parties agreed on?
One thing that is amazingly interesting with this project is the collaboration we have with Lightstorm, which is Cameron's company. We work directly with the same production directors who are working on the movies on a very regular basis, sometimes daily. We also cooperate with Weta down in New Zealand. We have direct feedback from Jon Landau, the producer. Then occasionally, Cameron himself steps in for certain approvals, or certain things that are directly linked to things that are of high importance to him. Obviously, lore is one of those, but also some of the art direction. Some of the choices we're making for the game are key to what they want to do with the movies. For us this is incredibly interesting, because they work in a different way than we do but they have the same obsession with quality. They see quality through a different lens, and it's extremely inspiring to work with some of the best in Hollywood. It's not like they review what we do; it's actually a joint creation process.

The Epic Games Store has received a lot of backlash over exclusivity deals like The Division 2, with some urging others to boycott. Did the game meet the sales expectations you had?
The honest answer is yes. PC is extremely healthy. I think the reality is that no matter what people say online, they buy games and they play games. There is sometimes a bit of a disconnect with big and bold statements on these topics, and then what people actually choose to do. Some of the people who complain about the game the loudest, we know from data that they are also people who played it the most. If you really get that angry about this, how come you played 1,000 hours? You can apply that same logic to the platform discussion. Okay, you were super upset about this, I get that, but you bought the game, you're happy with the game, and you play it every day. So it's a little bit confusing to put that in relationship to the very black-and-white statements that people seem to make sometimes.

Everybody in the industry is talking about game streaming right now. What are your thoughts on the technology?
I believe streaming and cloud-based games are going to broaden the market. Today, our market depends on how many people have a good machine. But if you remove the hardware need and you basically turn every connected screen on earth into a platform, it changes the market a lot.

I don't think there's anything wrong with creating games like The Division or the Avatar game or others who are in the same business. I think that that's actually the best kind of experience you can have in the virtual space. But it's pretty tough on accessibility. As I said before about The Division 2, I'm really proud that it's a very generous game for different kinds of gamers who want to play or experience the game in different ways. But if you add to that equation people who have been almost never played a triple-A game ever in their life, how is it generous toward them? That I think is a big step that we need to make as developers and as an industry.

The kind of media we produce is niche if you compare it to the audience that we will have once streaming is a fact. We're like this fine wine club. The press understands the fine wine that we're making, we're really proud of this fine wine, and we have people who know how to drink fine wine. But if you broaden the audience, I think we will come across as quite niche and quite inward-looking. I'm looking forward to that because I think it changes the accessibility to the worlds we create quite significantly, but it's not something that we know how to do yet.

So you're telling me that Massive wants to make Barefoot Wine?
[Laughs] I didn't say that. What is a great invitation card for a person who has never played a triple-A game? That's what I'm saying.

Do you ever think about returning to your RTS roots? Are there people in the office that say, "We need to go back and get the band back together?"
Yeah, always. To go full circle, one thing we are quite aware of is the fact that if you want to be dramatic about it, you could say that one year of R&D gave us 10 years of success in Ubisoft. Now that we're riding that wave, how do we make time for the same kind of R&D, because the seed of everything that happened in the decade was laid in a good year, where we actually had time to look inward? It's extremely rare for any dev studio to have time to do pure R&D, to pause and rethink. That is something that we are actively looking at today. Because now we need to be systematic about it. We're not going to get pure R&D time by accident as we did the previous time. When we talk about going back to the roots or bringing the band back together, I think it's more in that spirit than necessarily speaking of RTS games. It's more, how do we get time to investigate a couple of ideas that we have that we have a really good feeling about in the middle of the current and ongoing success, which is very time consuming as well?

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

1998
Polfeldt gets his first job in the IT industry as art director at Out There Communications

2001
Polfeldt becomes the managing director of newly founded MTG Modern Games

2003
Polfeldt writes the manuscript and works on level design for the squad-based real-time strategy title Beyond the Law: The Third Wave

2005
Polfeldt joins Massive Entertainment as director of marketing

2007
Massive ships the critically acclaimed RTS World in Conflict

2008
After the Activision-Vivendi merger, Activision sells Massive to Ubisoft

2009
Founder Martin Walfisz leaves Massive and Polfeldt is promoted to managing director

2011
Massive releases the Coma-sequences and Lost Archive DLC for Assassin's Creed Revelations

2016
The Division launches to generally favorable reviews

2017
Massive launches the 1.8 patch for The Division, which recruits new and returning players to the game

2017
Massive announces The Avatar Project

2017
Mario+Rabbids Kingdom Battle becomes the first non-Massive game to use Snowdrop, followed by South Park: The Fractured But Whole and Starlink: Battle for Atlas

2019
The Division 2 launches to strong sales and favorable reviews

E3 2019

THE BEST

by Ben Reeves

1

XBOX ELITE CONTROLLER SERIES 2

The original Elite remains one of the best controllers on the market, but Microsoft seems bent on chasing perfection. At E3, the industry giant announced a hardware update full of useful customization features. Interchangeable thumbsticks and paddle shapes allow users to find the perfect controller fit for their hands. Shortened hair-trigger locks allow players to decide how hard each trigger must be pressed. Meanwhile, the Xbox Accessories app can be used to remap the controller across three unique profiles. The Elite's built-in rechargeable battery now holds up to 40 hours of game time, and the controller can even charge while it's in its case. The Series 2 is Microsoft's most advanced controller to date, and we're itching to get our grubby hands on one this November.

$179 | xbox.com

TECH OF E3 2019

2

ALIENWARE M SERIES

Alienware's gaming laptops went on a diet; both the m15 and m17 machines have trimmed about five pounds of fat off previous iterations, so these new machines are sleeker than ever. They're also meaner; both laptops can be configured with Intel's ninth-generation core processors and Nvidia's latest GPUs, such as the GeForce RTX 2070. We're fond of the revamped sculpted keyboard, the polished glass touchpad, and the built-in Tobii eye-tracking technology. Both laptops have already started shipping, so anyone in the market for a new portable gaming machine should give Alienware's M series a spin.

Starting at $1,499 | dell.com

NINTENDO SWITCH

3

HORI SWITCH GRIP CONTROLLER

The Switch's joy-cons are functional and sleek, but fall short of the ergonomic ideal. Hori's newest redesign takes a more traditional controller design and slaps it to the side of your Switch, creating a portable console that's more comfortable over the long haul. Sporting a traditional d-pad, larger triggers, and a programmable underside button, this new grip looks ideal for those who play their Switch in handheld mode. Hori plans to start shipping the Switch Grip in the fall.

$45 | stores.horiusa.com

TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES
TURTLES IN TIME
nickelodeon

4

ARCADE1UP MINI CABINETS

Arcade1Up's miniature arcade cabinets are so adorable, we instantly fell in love when they launched last year. This year, the company is rolling out a new series of fan-favorite arcade classics. Each cabinet is 3/4 scale (standing around four feet tall) and features a full-color, high-resolution display. One of Arcade1Up's new units comes packed with Marvel Super Heroes, X-Men: Children of the Atom, and The Punisher. Another houses Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (1989) and Turtles in Time. However, our favorite is a recreation of the original arcade versions of Star Wars, Empire Strikes Back, and Return of the Jedi – complete with an X-Wing pilot controller.

Starting at $299 | arcade1up.com

❶

August2019

GAME RELEASES

Friday 02
- Madden NFL 20 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Tuesday 06
- Age of Wonders: Planetfall (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

Thursday 08
- The Lord of the Rings: Adventure Card Game (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

Tuesday 20
- Rad (PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)
- Remnant: From The Ashes (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Yu-Gi-Oh! Legacy of the Duelist: Link Evolution (Switch)

Thursday 22
- Life is Strange 2: Episode 4 (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- Oninaki (PS4, Switch, PC)

Tuesday 27
- Ancestors: The Humankind Odyssey (PC) ❶
- Control (PS4, Xbox One, PC)
- World of Warcraft: Classic (PC)

Friday 30
- Astral Chain (Switch)
- Blair Witch (Xbox One, PC)
- The Dark Pictures: Man of Medan (PS4, Xbox One, PC)

❷

MOVIE & TV PREMIERES

Friday 02
- Fast & Furious Presents: Hobbs & Shaw (theaters) ❷

Sunday 04
- Preacher (AMC)

Wednesday 07
- BH90210 (Fox)

Friday 09
- GLOW (Netflix)
- Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark (theaters)

Friday 16
- The Angry Birds Movie 2 (theaters)

Saturday 24
- Power (Starz)

Friday 30
- The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance (Netflix)

❸

GAMER CULTURE

Thursday 01
Gen Con 2019
The biggest board-game expo kicks off today in Indiana's Convention Center. More than 500 companies are expected to be debuting or selling products, and attendees are invited to play as much as they can, either at the vendors' booths or in the commons section with their own games. Gen Con runs for four days, and if playing games isn't your thing, you can sit in on over 19,000 different events.

Saturday 03
Absolute Carnage ❸
Marvel's big summer crossover event is called Absolute Carnage. If that sounds familiar, it is being teased as the next Maximum Carnage, a comic series that spawned a video game adaptation for SNES and Genesis. Absolute Carnage brings back Cletus Kasady, who has his sights on every person who has worn a symbiote, which obviously includes Peter Parker. A good number of Marvel's books this month will feature tie-ins to Absolute Carnage, a four-issue series which kicks off today with a 72-page first issue.

Tuesday 20
Gamescom 2019
The next big stop for video games following E3 has always been Gamescom, a five-day show held in Cologne, Germany. We don't anticipate seeing new hardware from Microsoft and Sony, but if you want to take a look at up-and-coming games from third-party developers, this year's show should be loaded with them. New titles also make their debut here.

Friday 23
2D Con 2019
Minnesota's biggest gaming expo kicks off today, and yes, you'll see Game Informer editors walking the halls, sitting in on panels, and hanging around to chat about the latest in video games. This three-day show offers tournaments, live music, a tabletop area, speedrunning competitions, and more.

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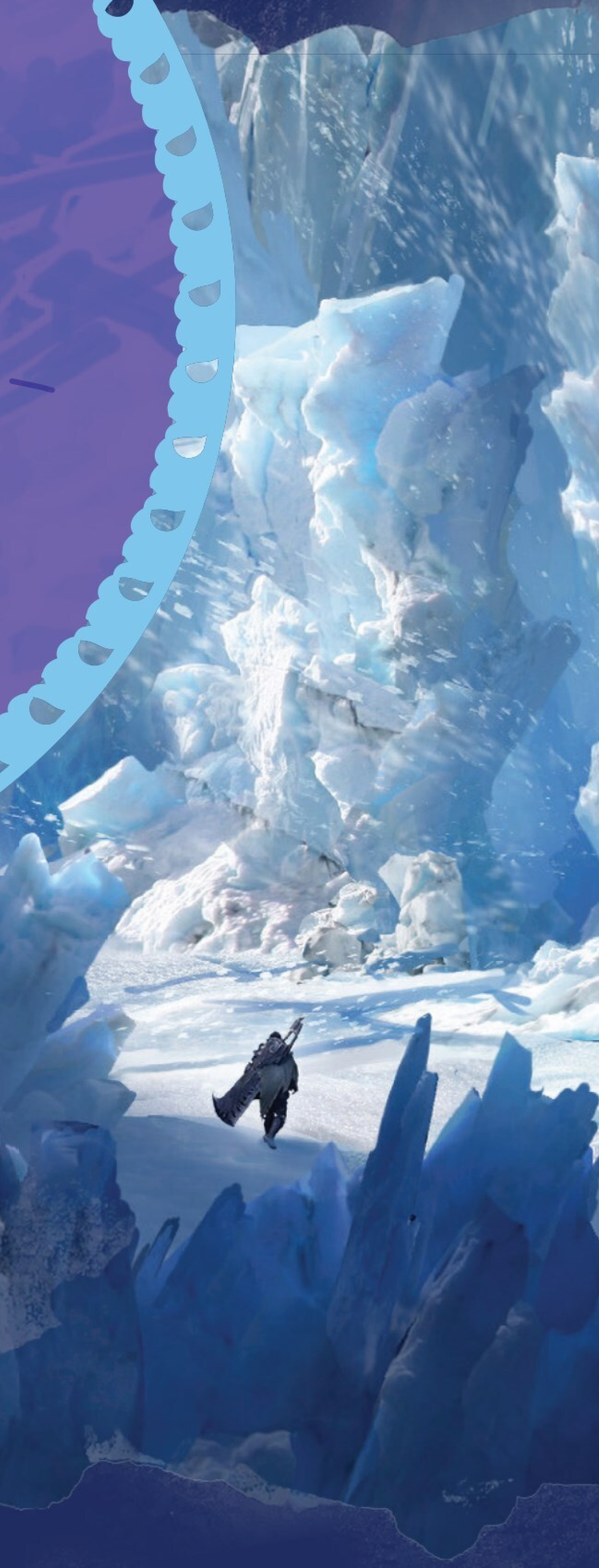
A WHOLE NEW WORLD



Monster Hunter: World is getting a gargantuan update with the Iceborne expansion, which fundamentally changes the hunt and adds a frosty, untamed land to explore

BY
JEFF CORK

» PLATFORM
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online)

» PUBLISHER
Capcom

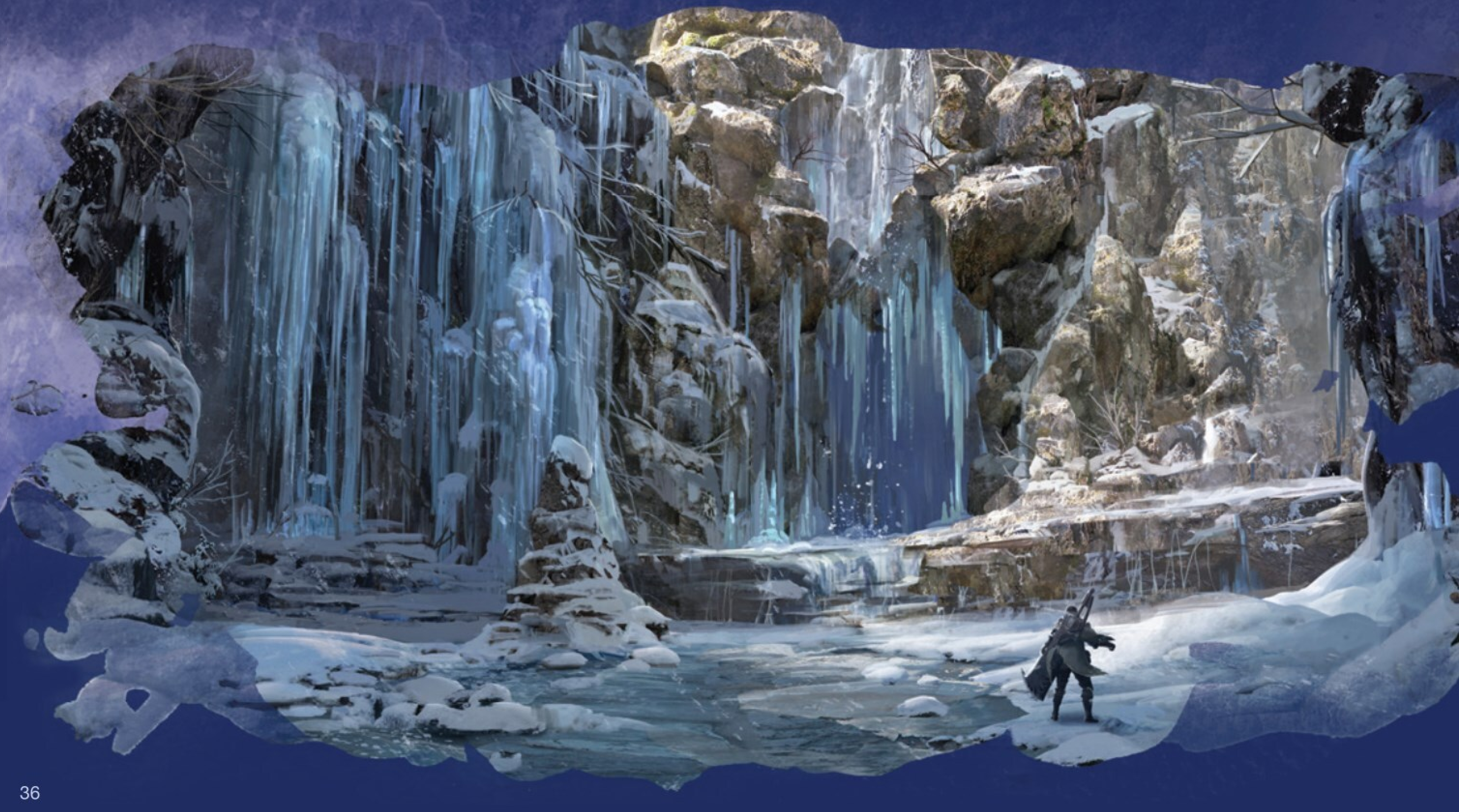
» DEVELOPER
Capcom

» RELEASE
September 6 (Console), Winter (PC)

MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD WAS CAPCOM'S ATTEMPT TO BRING THE NICHE SERIES TO THE MAINSTREAM, AND THE GAMBLE PAID OFF.

It's now the best-selling title in Capcom's history, with more than 12 million copies sold to players eager to engage in thrilling hunts across massive ecosystems. Capcom has dutifully kept the game fresh in the year since its release, adding new challenges and monsters, as well as crossover events featuring cameos from other games like The Witcher, Final Fantasy, and Horizon Zero Dawn. Where do we go from here? The upcoming Iceborne expansion promises to upend the formula once again, as players test their mettle against the unforgiving world of Hoarfrost Reach.

Our journey once again begins in Capcom's headquarters in Osaka, Japan. The team of Monster Hunter veterans, with new director Daisuke Ichihara, assembles to meet us and show off what they've been working on. It's an exciting time, as the developers have been hard at work preparing for both E3 and our visit. Over the course of two days, we got extensive hands-on time with several hunts and also gained a better sense of what Capcom is trying to accomplish with Iceborne.



During the initial presentation, we hear the phrase "massive expansion DLC" several times, which simultaneously sounds like an audaciously bold claim and marketing double-speak. After getting a handle on what it has to offer, however, the term is well-earned. Iceborne introduces an entirely new region, while also bringing additional layers to how players hunt. The region is the series' largest one yet, bigger than locations like World's Coral Highlands or Ancient Forest. This expansion wasn't developed in a vacuum, either.

"Before with previous Monster Hunter games, it was always Japan first, and then everyone else after that," says executive director and art director Kaname Fujioka. "Starting with World, it was more of a flat approach … We're not getting feedback from just Japan, we're getting feedback from pretty much everywhere around the world that's playing our games."

As you'll soon learn, the effects of that feedback run deep. For now, let's shift our attention away from Osaka and over to somewhere significantly colder. It's a vast, unexplored place called The Hinterlands, and it's inexplicably drawn the attention of wildlife from Monster Hunter: World. There must be a reason vast numbers of Legiana are migrating to this unknown space, and the Research Commission is determined to find out exactly what it is. In other words, stock up on provisions, sharpen your blades, and pack your bags, because we're leaving Astera.

Handler is one of the driving forces behind the move to explore The Hinterlands. What's motivating her?

HUNT #1

TIGREX

WITH SPECIAL GUEST BANBARO

Thanks to the magic of games, I don't have to make the journey from the New World to The Hinterlands in real time. I'm dropped into the Hoarfrost Reach location's southern camp and take a few moments to take in my surroundings. The same basic camp setup from World returns – mini canteen, item chest, tent, Handler – but a quick scan reveals this is definitely an all-new setting. For one thing, everything's covered in snow. "With World and also with Iceborne we wanted to do something with visual effects that we couldn't do before," Fujioka says. "Stuff like transparent ice or how the snow reacts. We wanted to challenge ourselves to do something we always wanted to do but we couldn't do previously."

This isn't a sightseeing expedition, however. Our goal is to hunt the Tigrex, a creature characterized as "a belligerent monster with a monstrous roar." "How monstrous can it be?" I wonder as I head out. My scoutflies zip over to highlight a sign of its activities, and it becomes clear: This is a monster that leaves bitemarks on the ground. Think about that for a moment. It bites the ground.

Before I dwell on it too much, I realize the cold is starting to sap my stamina. This camp is established in a forest, but the trees don't block the stinging wind. I grab some hot peppers from a bush and concoct a hot drink to at least temporarily stave off the cold. Then I resume my tracking. The region strikes a balance between feeling like a forest, with snow-laden pines and other vegetation, while also being open enough to accommodate the inevitable combat. After trudging past grazing, mammoth-like herbivores called Popos, the forest gives way to an icy clearing that eventually transitions into a series of caves. The scoutflies are going crazy; we must be getting close.

Tigrex is a quadrupedal wyvern, which basically means its wings have evolved into useful forelimbs. Or the forelimbs have evolved into wings. Regardless, the wings aren't the most pressing issue. It's not the biggest creature I've hunted, but its gaping, toothy maw and unchecked aggression make it clear that this isn't going to be the easiest hunt, either. Fortunately, I'm not alone.

My foursome includes hunters using an insect glaive, dual blades, and a hunting horn. I take out my light bowgun and start firing. Despite its intensity, the battle seems like fairly standard Monster Hunter stuff. Blade-wielders get in close and slash at the blue-and-yellow beast while it charges and feints, doing its best to outlive this group of strange interlopers. I hang back and take my shots, getting in close to drop explosive wyvernblast mines near it when I see an opening. It's fun, but it doesn't seem like a big leap over vanilla World. And then it happens: Our dual-blade user uses his slinger like a grappling hook and latches directly onto the Tigrex's face. It roars in displeasure while my teammate slashes wildly at its scaly hide.

Aside from the snowy setting, one of the most noticeable changes Iceborne brings is the addition of the clutch claw. It's a modified version of the slinger every hunter is equipped with, and it now fires off a grappling hook. "So you've used the clutch claw and you've grabbed onto the monster, what can you do from there?" asks game designer Yoshimoto Higa,

The Banbaro is an herbivore, but that doesn't mean it's a pushover somewhat rhetorically. “There are three different types of actions that you can do. You can continue to use the weapon that you have equipped. The other thing that you can do is you can fire all of your slinger ammo at once right at the monster.”

You can also redirect the monster, but I’ll get into that later. For now, the beast’s skin is whitened a bit, indicating it’s been softened. Now, attacks to that part of the creature deal more damage and have the added benefit of not being as likely to be deflected. Hunters who use fast, bladed weapons, like the dual blades, can also cut loose slinger ammo from the monsters, which is something that would only drop when a monster hit specific damage thresholds in World.

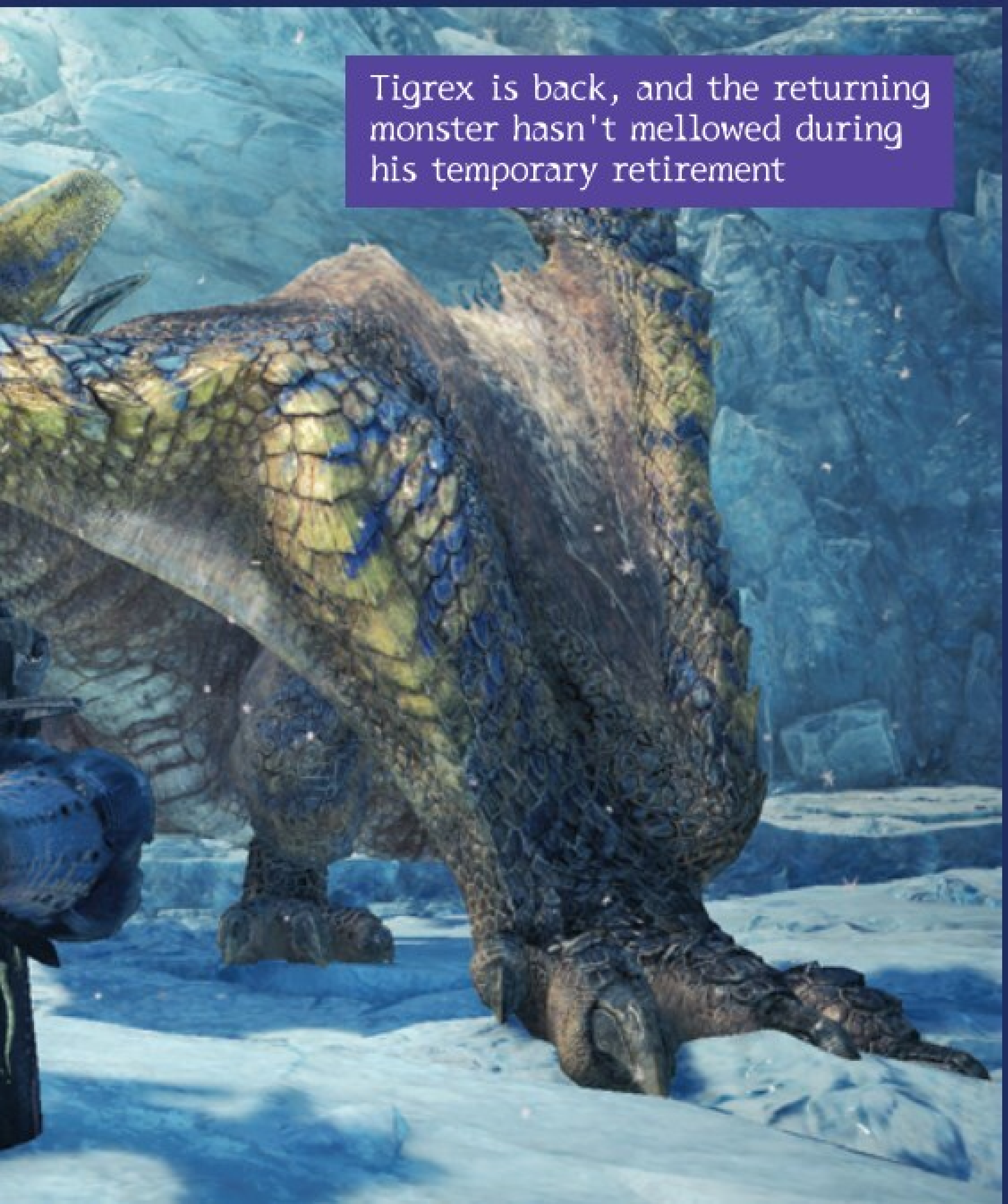
Tigrex pounces at me, flopping onto its belly and sliding, which would be almost comical if not for the fact that wall of teeth and talons is also coming my way. I fire my last desperation shot and roll out of the way just in time. Thanks to a new mod in my bowgun, I automatically reload a shot while evading immediately after firing. Once I stop moving, I fire a piercing round straight through the length of its body, dealing a nice amount of damage as the projectile courses its way through the monster.

It turns out light-bowgun users aren’t the only ones who had an arsenal refresh. All of the game’s 14 weapons has been kitted out with a new move or feature, each of which could offer big changes to the way they play. Dual blades can use slinger ammo while evading, dealing out damage as they avoid getting hit. Hammer users can expend slinger ammo to make enemies more likely to flinch, which can then be followed up with brutal smashes. Hunting-horn users can slam their weapon’s handle down vertically, and spin the head of their weapon for a series of quick attacks – a perfect complement to their often slow swings. Gunlancers can plant a wyrmstake stake blast on their target’s hide, providing an explosive target similar to the light bowgun’s ground-mounted wyvernblasts.

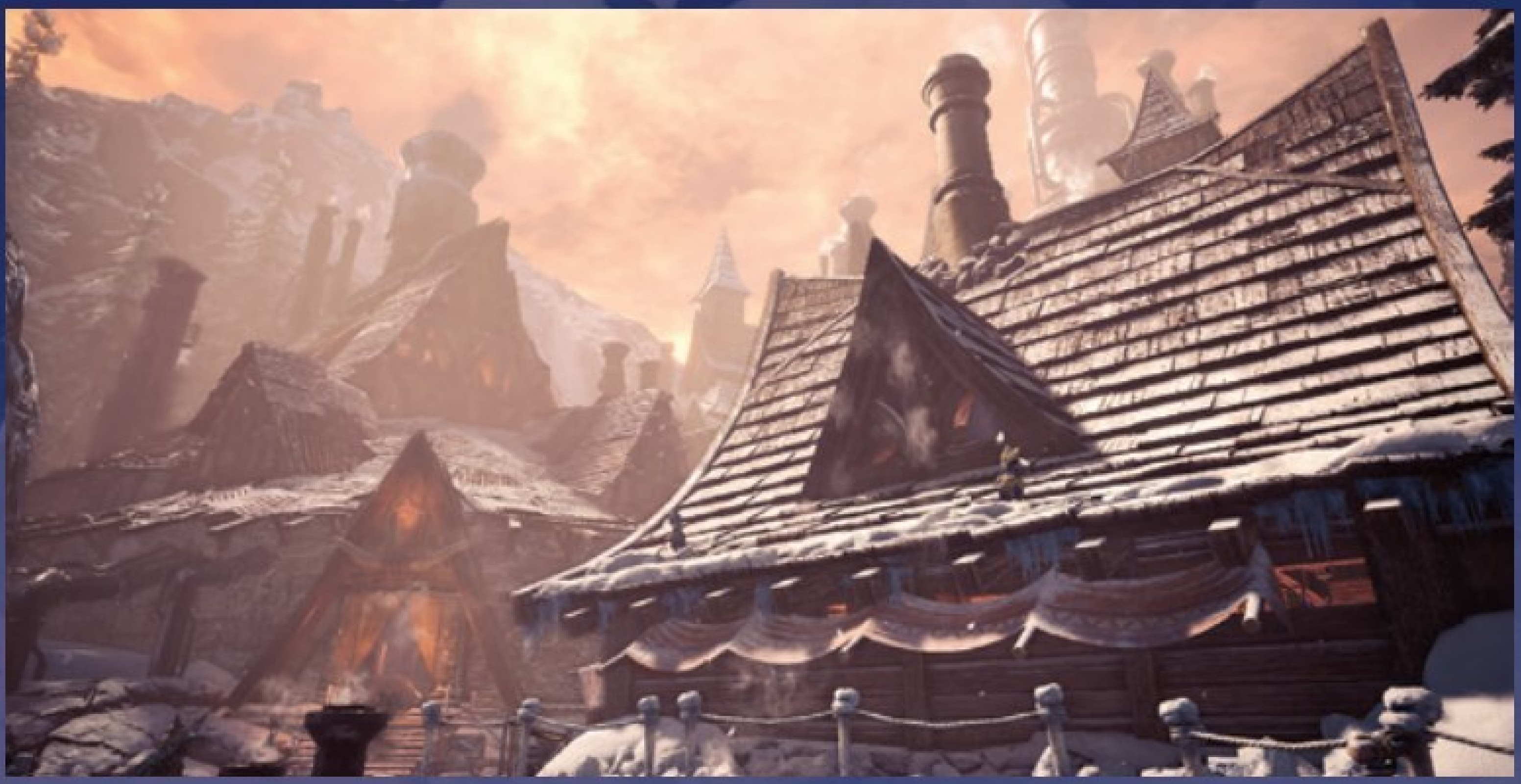
“The whole idea was to allow people to continue to enjoy their current weapon and expand further upon it and get better with it via new combos, or it’s an opportunity to go, ‘Hey, there are new combos and maybe this is a great opportunity to try a new weapon,’” Higa says. “They can stick to their guns and use that one weapon or look at it like, ‘The world’s my oyster, let’s go.’”

Back to Tigrex, he’s not happy with our presence. Now fully enraged, Tigrex has taken to slamming its fists into the ice and jamming them forward, sending shards of ice at our team. I roll away, but the camera pans over to a new monster who’s entered the area: Banbaro. Evidently, some of those shards hit the huge herbivore’s face as it was passing by, and it’s not at all pleased. It shakes its head – adorned with a ridiculously large pair of antlers – and charges at Tigrex. At this point, my party decides to hang back and watch the show as the two battle. Realizing it’s outmatched by the four hunters and Banbaro, Tigrex limps away to a nearby glacier. We follow, with Banbaro in tow. Banbaro is highly territorial, and apparently we’re in its space.

Eventually, Tigrex succumbs to our onslaught. Even though, like all of the monsters in Iceborne, Tigrex is a master-rank hunt (the equivalent of the old G-rank), it’s no match for our party. The beast’s last act is to leave its version of a snow angel on the ground as it collapses. Banbaro wanders away as we carve up Tigrex to claim new crafting components.



Tigrex is back, and the returning monster hasn't mellowed during his temporary retirement



HOME BASE SELIANA

Monster Hunter: World players embarked on hunts from the Research Commission base Astera, but they get a new base of operations when exploring the Hinterlands. This new hub is called Seliana, and it’s been built in a section of the Hinterlands called Hoarfrost Reach.

“With Astera, it was basically facing the open sea and it was a place with a lot of rich nutrients and it was easy to grow stuff,” says environment artist Sachiko Fukuda. “With Seliana, it’s surrounded by mountains, and they want a place where people can do their work for the hunters.” The Research Commission chose this location in part because of its proximity to sources of thermal energy, which, thanks to some clever engineering, powers everything in the village.

The team got some feedback from players who found Astera difficult to navigate, particularly when it came to visiting often-used services. Seliana isn’t as unwieldy– there aren’t any chain elevators, for instance– which is a function of its smaller size. “There are reasons from both the visual design and the game design as to why it’s more compact,” says executive director and art director Kaname Fujioka. “If we wanted to make something that, in terms of game design, was super easy to access everything, then we’d just put all of our facilities in a straight line and call it a day– it would be an easy thing to do. But we want something that’s a lot of fun to walk around in, so you can walk around and find interesting little things here and there.”

Some of those things include wagons that stop in the outskirts of the village, where you can watch them being loaded before they head back down the road again. There’s also a bundled-up Poogie wandering around, who has a tiny icicle dangling from his snout. Overall, there’s a fun sense that this is a village still establishing itself in an unhospitable world. Some characters from Astera, such as the smith, have moved to Seliana, while new characters have stepped up to fill existing roles.

I’d be remiss if I didn’t call out one of those new characters, the Grammeowster Chef. This Lynian cook is the one who taught Astera’s Meowscular Chef how to sling ingredients together, though her demeanor is entirely different. Whereas Astera’s cook typically delivers food in a frenzied show, Grammeowster has a grandmotherly vibe. Her kitchen is a cozy nook dominated by a massive pot of stew.

“We put a lot of thought and effort into making you be able to taste the food when you see it,” Fujioka says. “For example, the beef stew and the melted cheese, it’s something that you know there’s a lot of good taste behind it. We wanted something different from just a slab of meat in the Chef’s canteen.”

HUNT #2 BARIOTH

The clutch claw looks like a lot of fun, and I'm determined to make use of it during my next hunt. I appreciated how softening up the hide benefited the rest of the team, but I'm particularly interested in another facet of the claw: how it allows hunters to essentially control the monsters they're hunting, provided they're skilled enough.

"We really wanted to emphasize the use of the environment in Iceborne," Ichihara says. "In World, there were already options you could use the environment in, and we were thinking about how we could improve on that and how we could expand on that. It's not just about controlling the monster itself, but it's more about what's on the other side of that – you can control it, but what are you controlling it to do?"

Players who buy Iceborne can't immediately jump into the Hinterlands until they've completed the main campaign in Monster Hunter: World, but new mechanics like the clutch claw and new weapon abilities are available from the start. That means you can grapple onto an Anjanath's head and guide it like a horse into the path of a vine trap. Or you can more easily position a Rathalos to get swept away by a torrent of water. Not only is it fun to smack a monster around and aim it where you want to go, but it also opens up a variety of strategic options, such as making it easier to direct them into your traps.

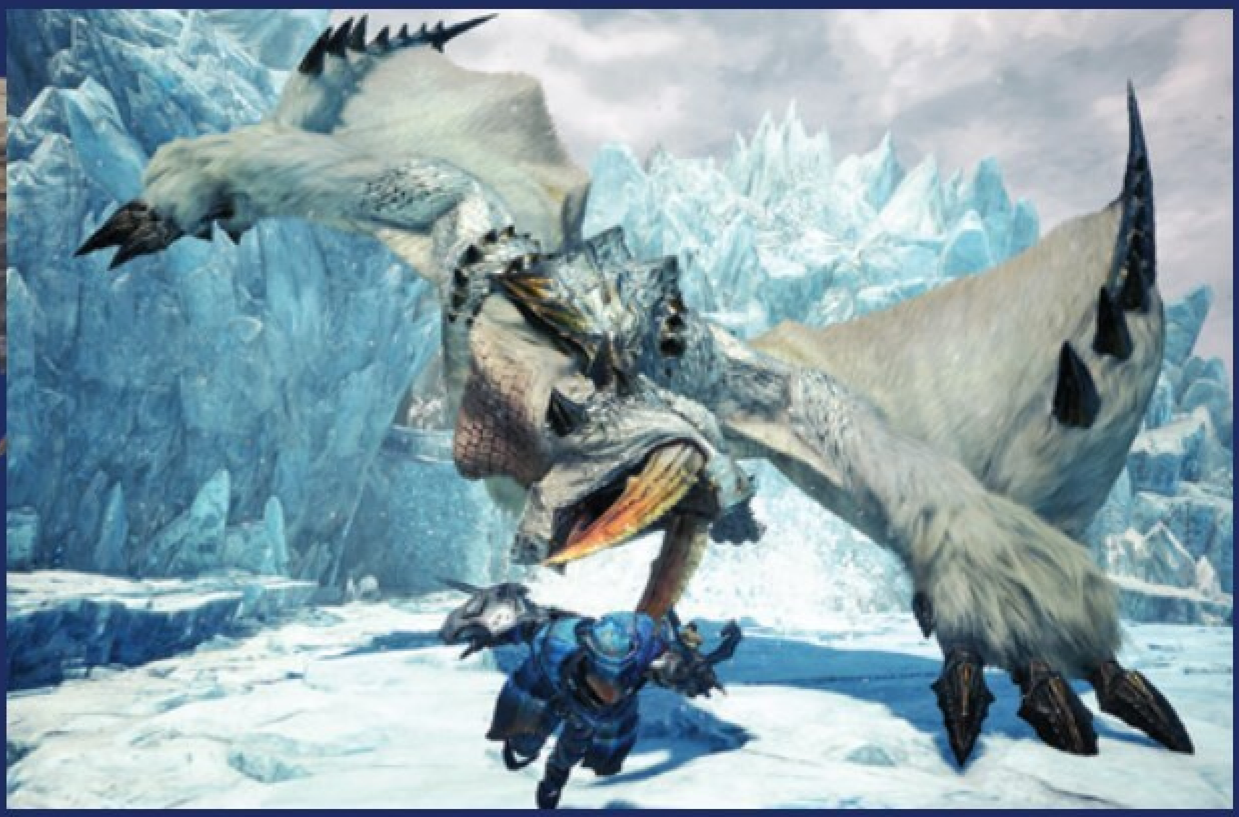
I keep that all in mind as I head out to find the Barioth, a monster first introduced in Monster Hunter Tri. It's another quadrupedal wyvern, though it more closely resembles a sabretooth tiger than the reptilian form of the Tigrex. Because it's a returning monster, the team didn't have to start from scratch when building it for Iceborne. They began using concept art from the original design and worked from there.

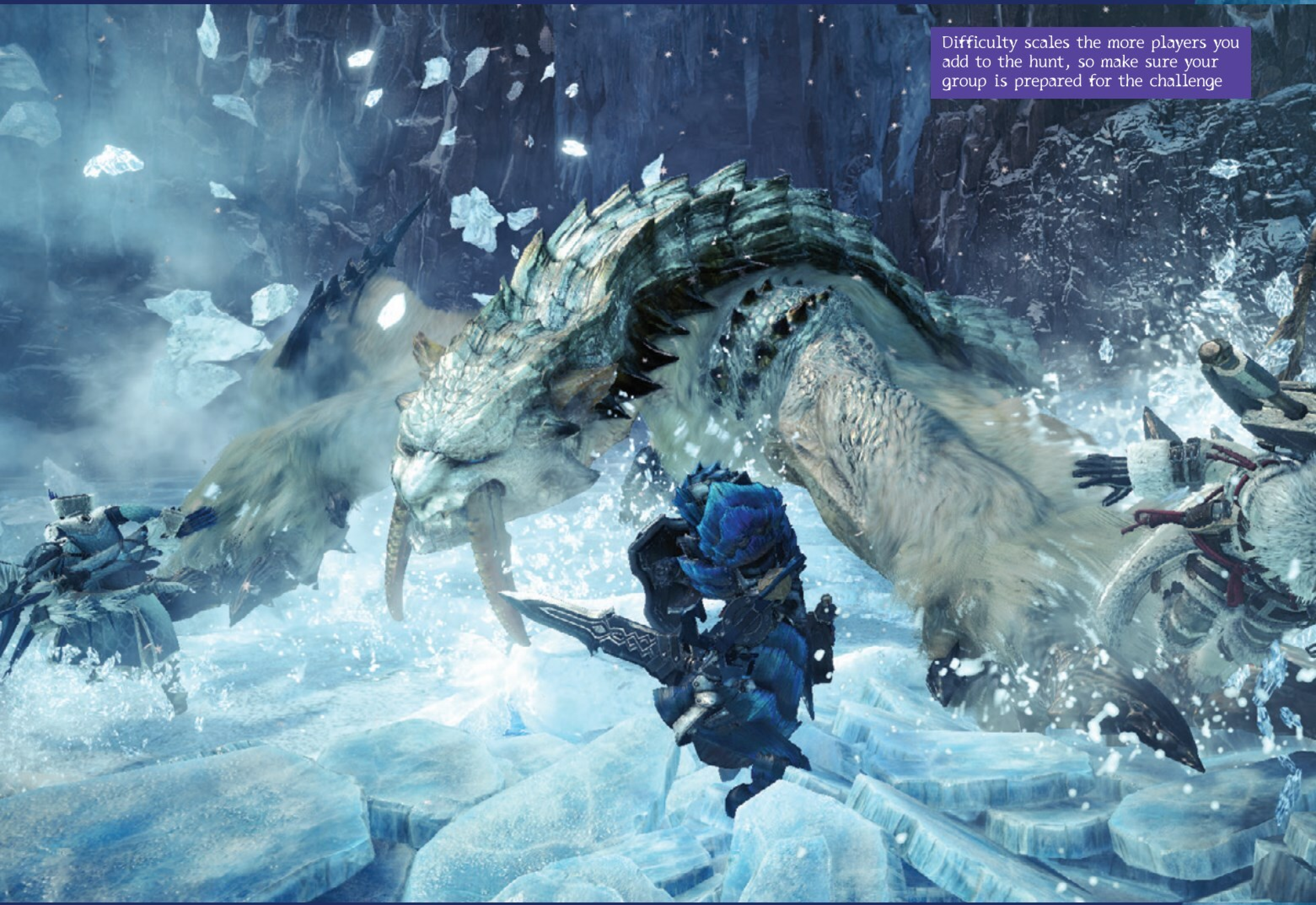
"In the previous appearance of Barioth, we obviously had limitations in technology in terms of the level of detail that we could show," Fujioka says. "For example, the talons or the fingers, we weren't able to showcase the detail previously. This time around, we wanted to showcase that if it was going to be gripping onto a surface, what kind of details would be in the joints and the claws and talons and spikes – that's the kind of level of detail that we were able to implement this time around."

Those aren't just cosmetic details, either. Hunters can damage those spikes, making it less maneuverable on icy surfaces. Players don't have to worry about being similarly hindered; you can suffer the effects of the cold, but you don't ever need to worry about sliding on the ice. "If you're sliding, then you can't really control where you are, and it's our policy to not have those kinds of bad elements," Fujioka says. "We want to put elements into stages that you can enjoy and utilize to your needs. That's why you don't slide."

Tracking the monster follows a familiar cadence, though that's going to be changing in Iceborne. Most significantly, the process can be automated a bit by using something called raider rides. In short, your Palico companions can call in smaller animals for you to ride as they track your specified monster. You can't steer the creature, but you're free to pick up items, sharpen weapons, and do

If you look closely in the distance, you can spy some penguin-like creatures practicing their diving techniques



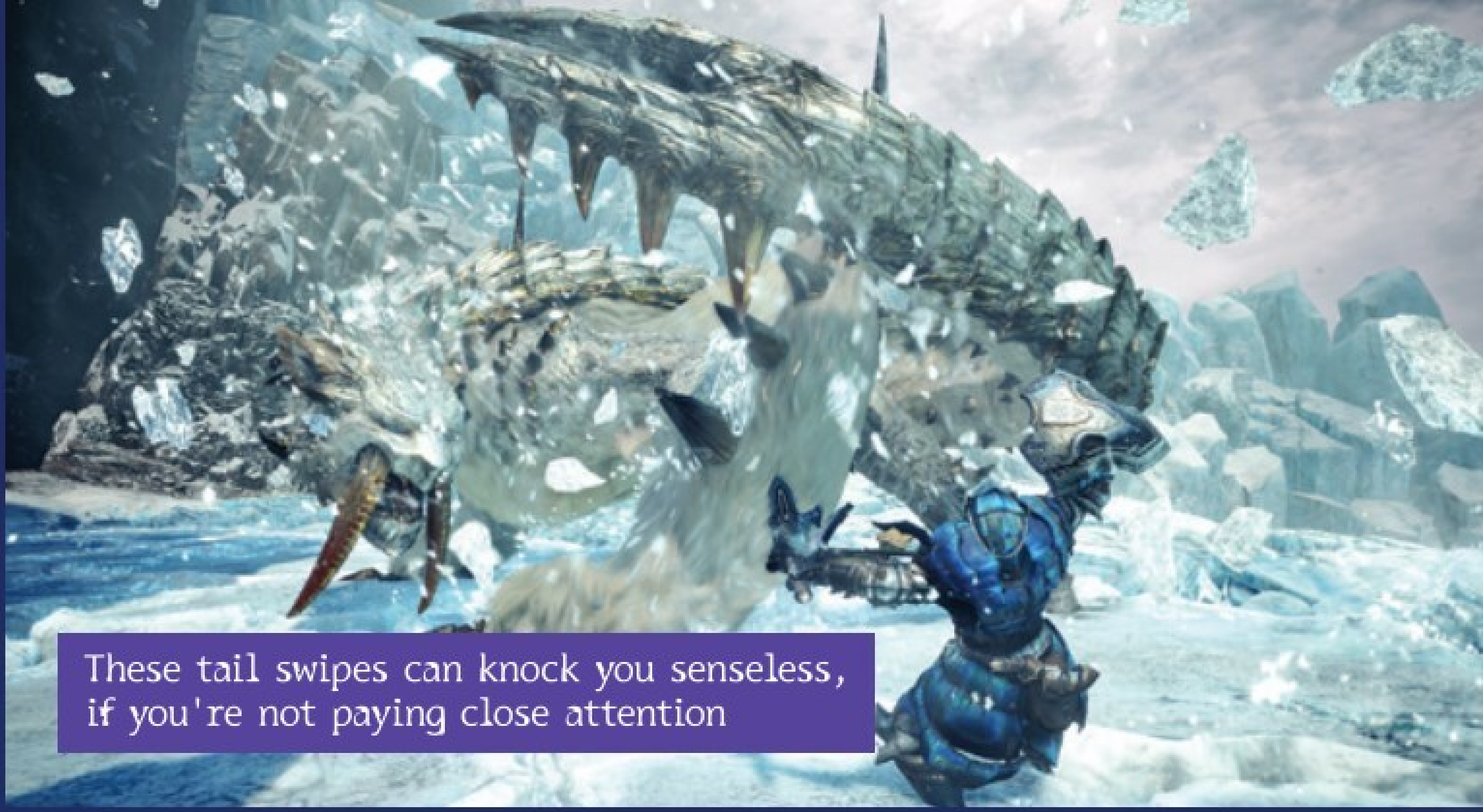


Difficulty scales the more players you add to the hunt, so make sure your group is prepared for the challenge

maintenance-type things – or just enjoy the view. That feature wasn't in our build, however, so I had to make do the old fashioned way, following one set of markings at a time.

Our hunt starts in earnest as we walk across a glacial plateau. Nearby is the entrance to a cave network, but we pass by it for the time being and climb up a frozen waterfall. Almost immediately after our ascent, we're face to face with Barioth. It's a weird-looking creature, with enormous orange tusks. It sees us approach, and it blasts from its crouched position to the sky. It lands with a crash, and then swings its massive spiked tail at us. The move takes several of us by surprise, and we're knocked against the side of a nearby ice cliff. Barioth crouches again, unleashing a series of swiping attacks that are tough to evade.

Below us is a precipitous drop. The ice seems solid, but looking at the map it's clear the ground shouldn't be trusted. Sure enough, after it comes crashing down at us again the ground shakes and gives way. I plummet a few dozen feet, thankful that Iceborne doesn't have fall damage. Whew! I climb back up and see Barioth is staggered – the perfect opening for the claw. I zip over to its head, and smack it a few times to initiate the redirect move I mentioned before. The beast dutifully rotates its body, until I aim it at a rocky wall. I unload my Slinger ammo into its face and dismount, and Barioth blindly walks into the wall and falls down, dazed. My party pounces on the fallen monster, taking full advantage of its helpless state. A pack of badger-like creatures called Wulg join in, as well.



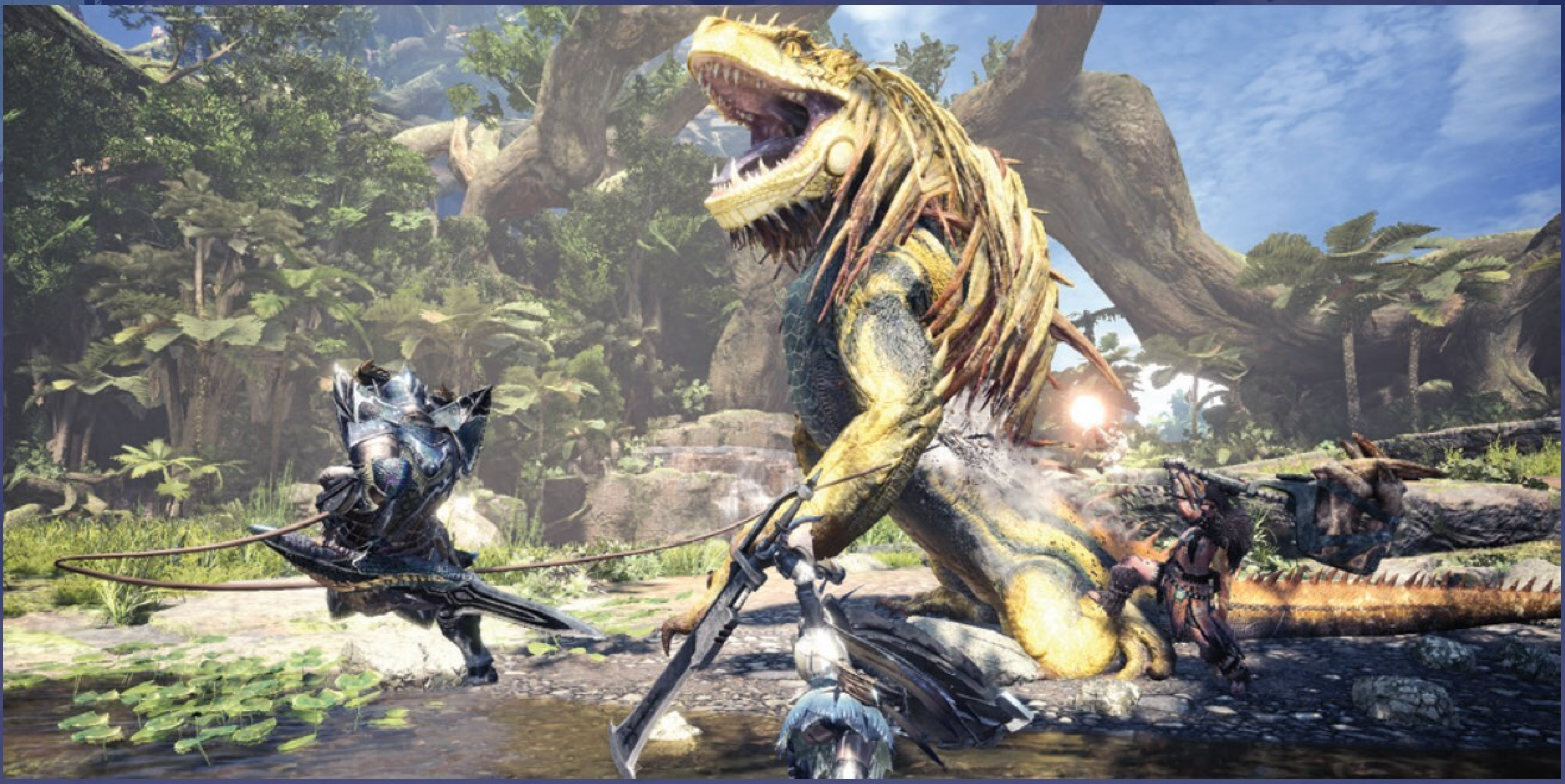
These tail swipes can knock you senseless, if you're not paying close attention

The monster comes to and scurries away. We pursue it to what looks like an icy amphitheater. We're there to kill a monster, but it's hard not to appreciate how beautiful it is. Even though it's a world of ice and snow, Iceborne showcases an impressive amount of visual variety. That's not by accident. "It's very, very difficult to make this stage because in Monster Hunter, these worlds are to an extent open," says graphic artist Nodoka Kembe. "We want to make everything look as unique as possible so you know where you are, and nothing looks the same if you go to different areas; it's not just white, it's not just green. Trying to figure out how everything is going to come together and give it a really cool, unique look is very difficult."

If it was looking for a break, Barioth picked the wrong place. Another monster (whose identity we can't yet reveal) dropped from an alcove and got in a few quick hits before skulking off. In another nice tweak, players can now use their slingers to fire projectiles without sheathing their main weapons. That's familiar territory to sword and shield users, but it's revelatory for just about everyone else. I take advantage of that by firing some stones at the icicles on the ceiling and immediately resuming my light-bowgun barrage on the Barioth. Before he can turn his attention to me, he's bombarded with the falling chunks of ice.

Barioth's eyes have changed from amber to a cool blue, and his fangs have broken off during the battle. As if on cue, he runs away from the battle once again. We track him down to an ice cave, where he's snoozing away. I almost feel guilty as my teammate plants several explosive barrels next to his snoring body, but then I inadvertently blow one up and take damage. He will pay for my incompetence! We chop off the monster's tail in one final act of indignity before it finally dies with a mighty roar.

I notice that below our feet, frozen in the ice, are several fish – perhaps caught unaware by the temperature change. Later, I ask Kembe about the visual detail. "Japanese people like that," she says, laughing. I'll have to take her at her word.



NEW CHANGES TO OLD FIENDS

The Hinterlands are a major part of the story in Monster Hunter World: Iceborne, but that doesn't mean the action is isolated to that area. During the course of the story, players return to the New World to see how the rest of the discovered world is faring. Since the game introduces master-rank hunts, hunters will get to battle more difficult versions of familiar monsters.

"Basically, all monsters that were present in low rank and high rank also appear naturally in master rank," says game director Daisuke Ichihara. "They appear in difficulty not just with their parameters upped arbitrarily, but they have new mechanics added to them and their playstyle has been adjusted in a way that is basically appropriate for that new difficulty. There's a higher volume of things that you need to watch out for when you're fighting those monsters."

Take the Great Jagras, for example. This giant reptile is a large monster that players face early in World's campaign, but he quickly becomes a bit of a punching bag. Don't expect him to transform into an endgame challenge in Iceborne, but at the same time, players shouldn't get complacent when facing him again.

As with all returning monsters, he has some new tricks up his sleeve. Like what? "Dirty things, like vomiting on the player," says executive director and art director Kaname Fujioka. "The fight with the Great Jagras has a bit more pressure now, because it has a wide variety of attacks that the player has to watch out for, but it's not the case where the player is suddenly fighting a Great Jagras that is so much more difficult than he was in World; it's still adjusted properly and appropriately for the difficulty, with a natural difficulty curve that will make it not a shock for players who are first encountering him in master rank."

HUNT #3

VELKHANA

Every Monster Hunter game has its flagship monster, and in our final hunt we get to take on Iceborne's elder dragon Velkhana. This creature shares some commonalities with most other elder dragons – such as its affinity for a single element – but it's a nice departure from what we've battled in World.

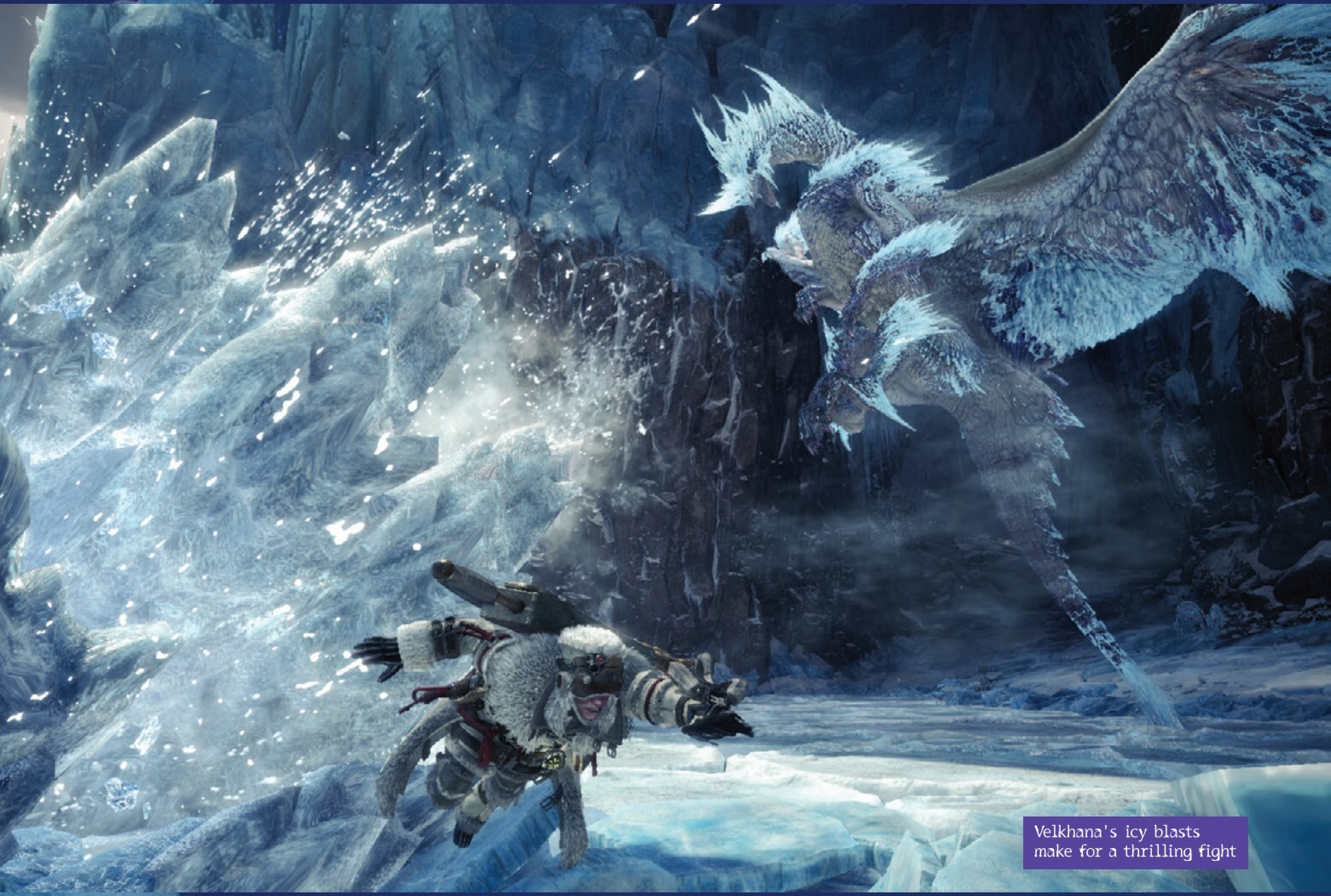
I start the hunt feeling unsure. Things have gone well so far, but this is an elder dragon we're talking about. These are the best of the best, and Velkhana is presumably going to be flexing its master-rank status with impunity. I swing by the camp's canteen for a quick meal of hearty stew, check my inventory one last time, and head out. I catch up with my fellow hunters, and I'm surprised by what I see. There, in a clearing, is Velkhana just chilling by itself. I inch closer, and it doesn't seem to see me. Then I get even closer, and I realize it knows I'm there, but it simply doesn't care about me at all. It doesn't charge. It doesn't flee. I'm as insignificant to it as the snowflakes that drift down from the sky.

In this moment of peace, I pause to appreciate the music, which is filled with bells and chimes and other wintry-sounding instrumentation. Something tells me it's about to get a lot more dramatic in the near future, so I may as well enjoy the calm while I can.

Unlike the hulking brutes like Nergigante, Monster Hunter: World's flagship elder dragon, Velkhana seems birdlike and elegant. It's still quite large and imposing, but doesn't have the same stocky, squat build. I don't fault those other elder dragons for their forms – being at the absolute top of the food chain comes with certain benefits – but it's nice to see the mold being broken yet again in Iceborne. It's birdlike in a way, and majestic. Its scales are iridescent purple and blue, and it shimmers in the light.

My hunting party does a verbal check to make sure we're all ready, and then we mount our attack. The moment we strike Velkhana, the tone shifts. Velkhana hovers into the air and unleashes an eardrum-splitting shriek. Its formerly lithe frame is instantly transformed as it covers itself in icy armor. It whirls around, hitting us with frosty breath that afflicts me with a status ailment. Velkhana may be an ice-excreting dragon, but the designers were careful not to take too many liberties in its design.

Elder dragon Velkhana (Iceborne's flagship monster) shrouds itself in an icy layer of armor



Velkhana's icy blasts make for a thrilling fight

"The one thing we wanted to make sure with Velkhana – and really with any monster – is making sure that its actions and all of its features are very logical," Fujioka says. "They're very believable. We didn't want it to be defined as, 'Oh, it's able to use these ice attacks by performing magic.' We didn't want that kind of characteristic; we wanted it to be grounded in some level of believability."

Believability is all well and good, but it doesn't feel particularly grounded while I'm being bombarded with blasts of ice – though my skepticism may be coming more from a place of hurt than incredulity. "What we ultimately chanced upon was the idea of supercooling, where liquid immediately turns to a solid under certain conditions," Fujioka explains. "We felt that would be a very interesting concept to base an elder dragon on, so we went in that specific direction. When it shoots an icy breath, it's liquid while it's still breathing, but the moment that it hits the ground that liquid immediately turns to ice. At the same time, if it's interacting with the air around it and there's kind of a more dense fog, that breath is able to interact with that fog and create ice in midair."

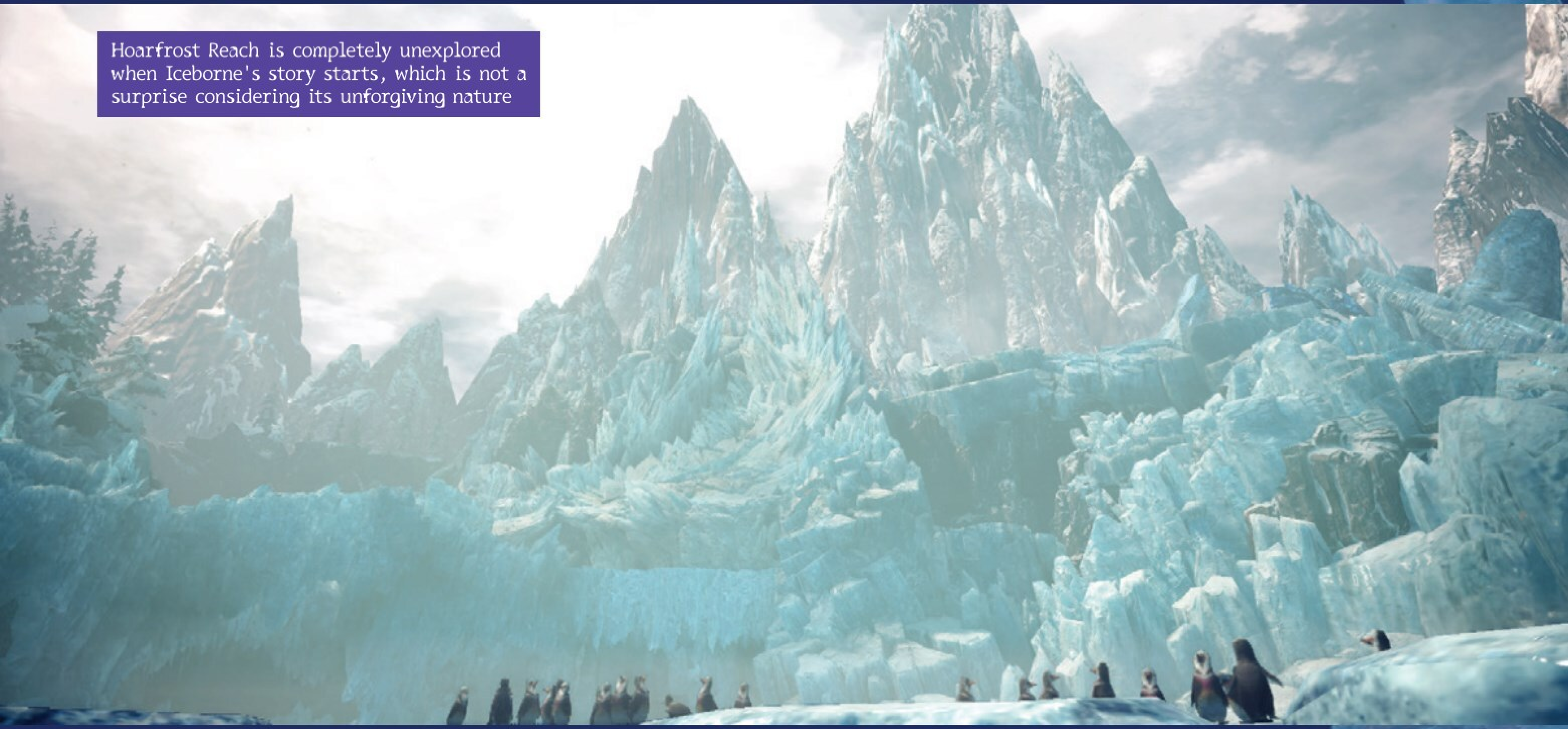
As for its armor plating, Velkhana secretes a substance between its scales that is particularly susceptible to supercooling, which allows it to shroud itself in armor at will. That armor proves to be tough to penetrate, provided my team is able to get close enough to strike in the first place. Velkhana is a master of evasion, darting through the air and striking with its forked tail. To further complicate things, it's able to unload an area-of-effect blast that can effectively corral its victims in walls of spiky icicles. A big part of Monster Hunter is being mobile and reacting, so getting penned in is surprising – and deadly. As long as the icicles remain, I'm unable to roll out of the way of Velkhana's follow-up attacks, or any of the attacks from smaller wyverns that have been drawn to the battle.

Our hunting-horn player does his best to keep the party buffed, blasting out a new tune that drops small healing zones. It's invaluable, but not nearly as much as the fact that Capcom outfitted us with several ringers from the development team. I'm basically being carried as they make the best use of the new tools, finding the right openings, dodging when it seems impossible, and making me feel like I'm in an anime. Perhaps an anime where I'm a guy who watches amazing things happening around him. I take shots when I can and essentially stick to my main job of not dying. It's a lengthy battle, but even Velkhana proves to be mortal. I almost feel guilt carving into its body, but not guilty enough to avoid claiming my prizes. I appreciate the philosophy of "Take only memories, leave only footprints," but this isn't that kind of a hike – and I've got the reduced life bar to prove it.

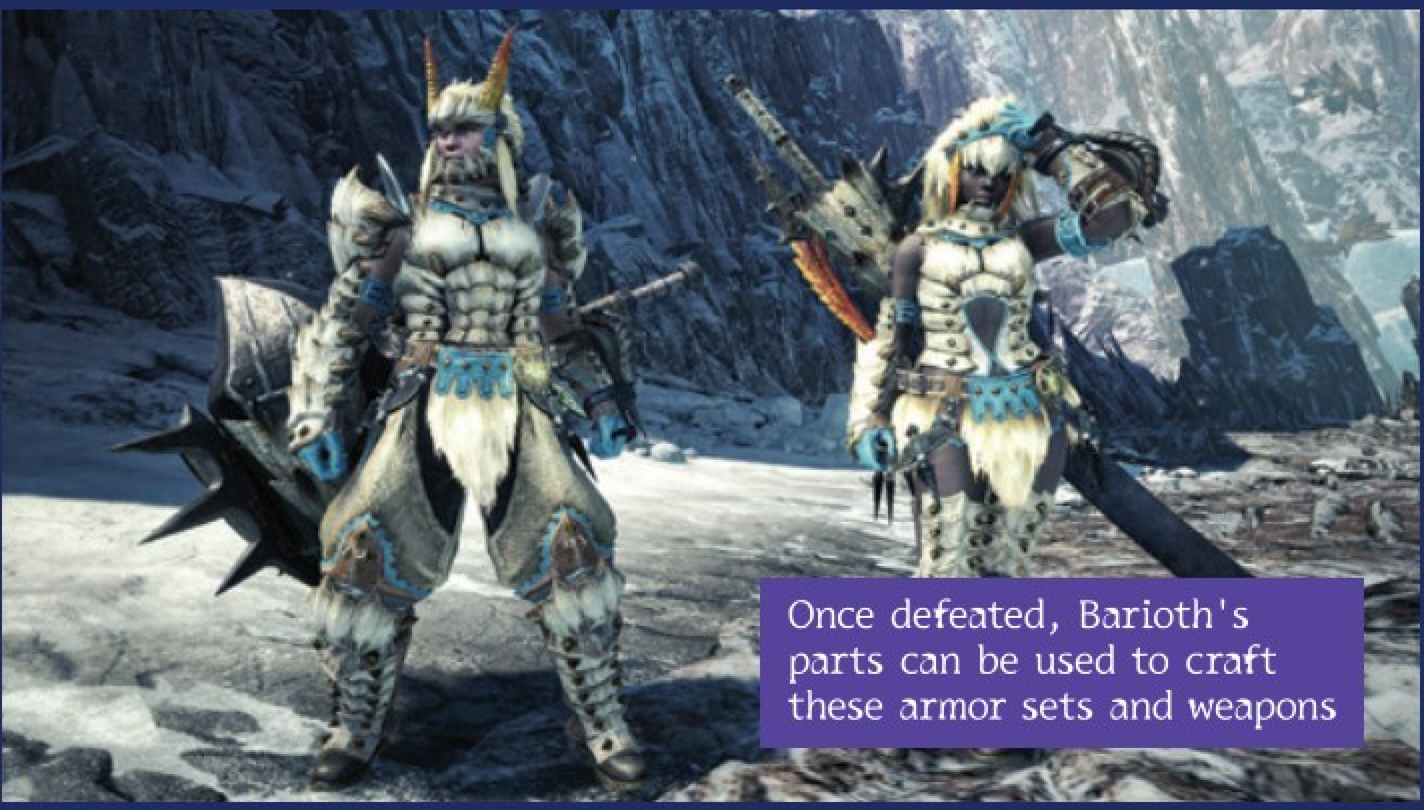
WHAT IF YOU DON'T UPGRADE?

Iceborne releases in September for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, but what does that mean for the rest of us? If you don't want to pick up the expansion, will you be left in the cold in another way? You won't be able to experience any of the new locations or weapon updates, though players who have purchased Iceborne can join your games and use their expanded arsenal in your hunts. Expect to be more than a little jealous as they clutch claw their way to victory. Existing Monster Hunter: World players can pick it up for $39.99, and the Iceborne content will also be rolled into a bundle with the main game for $59.99.

If you're cooling off, take a quick dip in a hot spring to refresh your stamina and health



Hoarfrost Reach is completely unexplored when Iceborne's story starts, which is not a surprise considering its unforgiving nature



Once defeated, Barioth's parts can be used to craft these armor sets and weapons

READY FOR MORE

The first thing I did when I got home from our trip to see Iceborne was fire up Monster Hunter: World. I'd always been a light-bowgun user, but something about seeing the hunting horn in action had me intrigued. A few dozen hours later, and I was in love – even without having access to the new maneuvers that are coming to the weapon. Ultimately, that's one of the biggest strengths Monster Hunter has going for it. Each of the game's weapons plays so completely differently that, with enough experimentation, there's bound to be something that'll click for you.

Not only that, but one of the big things that World did was open up the community. With more players than ever, it's easy to group up with new people and take on challenges with your fellow hunters. That sense of community is likely going to grow even stronger as Iceborne launches and players once again start to tame a wild new world.

Capcom wouldn't say how long the Iceborne expansion is, which is a fairly loaded question. Replayability is a main part of the Monster Hunter experience, and with new master-rank armor sets and weapons to craft, the loop of killing and looting monsters is only bound to be reinforced with the expansion. Fujioka did say there are about as many cutscenes in Iceborne as there were in World, if that's any indication of what we're up against when the expansion is released in September.

Be sure to visit www.gameinformer.com/iceborne for exclusive Monster Hunter World: Iceborne information, including monster profiles, video features, and more

E3 HOT 50

THE AVALANCHE OF GAMES IS UPON US. Even with Sony's notable absence, E3 2019 delivered a memorable smorgasbord of interactive experiences thanks to a strong showing from third-party publishers. High-profile games like Cyberpunk 2077, Final Fantasy VII, and Watch Dogs Legion may have stolen the headlines, but the roster of intriguing games runs much deeper than the surface. The *Game Informer* staff has emerged from a week of first looks, hands-on gameplay sessions, and developer interviews to bring you the news about all the games we all look forward to playing in the next year and beyond. Here are our 50 favorite titles from E3 2019.

CYBERPUNK 2077

Dazzling with gameplay choices amidst an ambitious, high-tech world

01

Welcome to
COMBAT ZONE

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Role-Playing* ***Publisher:*** *CD Projekt*
Developer: *CD Projekt Red* ***Release:*** *April 16*

At last year's E3, Cyberpunk 2077 hands-down stole the show, drawing long lines and plenty of awards as CD Projekt Red finally lifted the curtain on its long-awaited project. It was a hard showing to top, but CD Projekt Red somehow managed to garner more enthusiasm and awe for its next open-world venture. Not only was the April 16 release date finally revealed at Microsoft's E3 press conference, but actor Keanu Reeves, who is no stranger to the cyberpunk genre himself, took the stage to announce his role in Cyberpunk 2077. It quickly became one of the most talked-about moments from the show.

With a strong press-conference appearance in hand, CD Projekt Red then treated press and fans alike to a 50-minute behind-closed-doors demo that showed off the level of choice possible through gameplay. This was our first in-depth look at the varied options for tackling missions that also delved into more of the RPG mechanics. As the buzz around the demo spread, Cyberpunk 2077 quickly retained its crown for being the game to see at the show. We sat down with the developers to learn more about what we can expect from one of the biggest games of 2020.

The new demo, which displayed both stealthy intrigue and lethal slaughter, showcased just how far CD Projekt Red wants to go in terms of giving you choice. "For Witcher 3, we had this challenge that we set for ourselves that we would like to combine a narrative-driven game with a sprawling open world, and a lot of people told us we couldn't do this – that we had to [pick] one or the other," says quest director Mateusz Tomaszkiewicz. "We were like, 'We're going to do it' and it worked. For Cyberpunk we want to continue doing that, but add an additional layer of non-linearity in the gameplay. This is something we didn't do in our previous game, and it was very special for us in terms of challenge, like 'How do we push it even further?'"

WHERE'S JOHNNY?

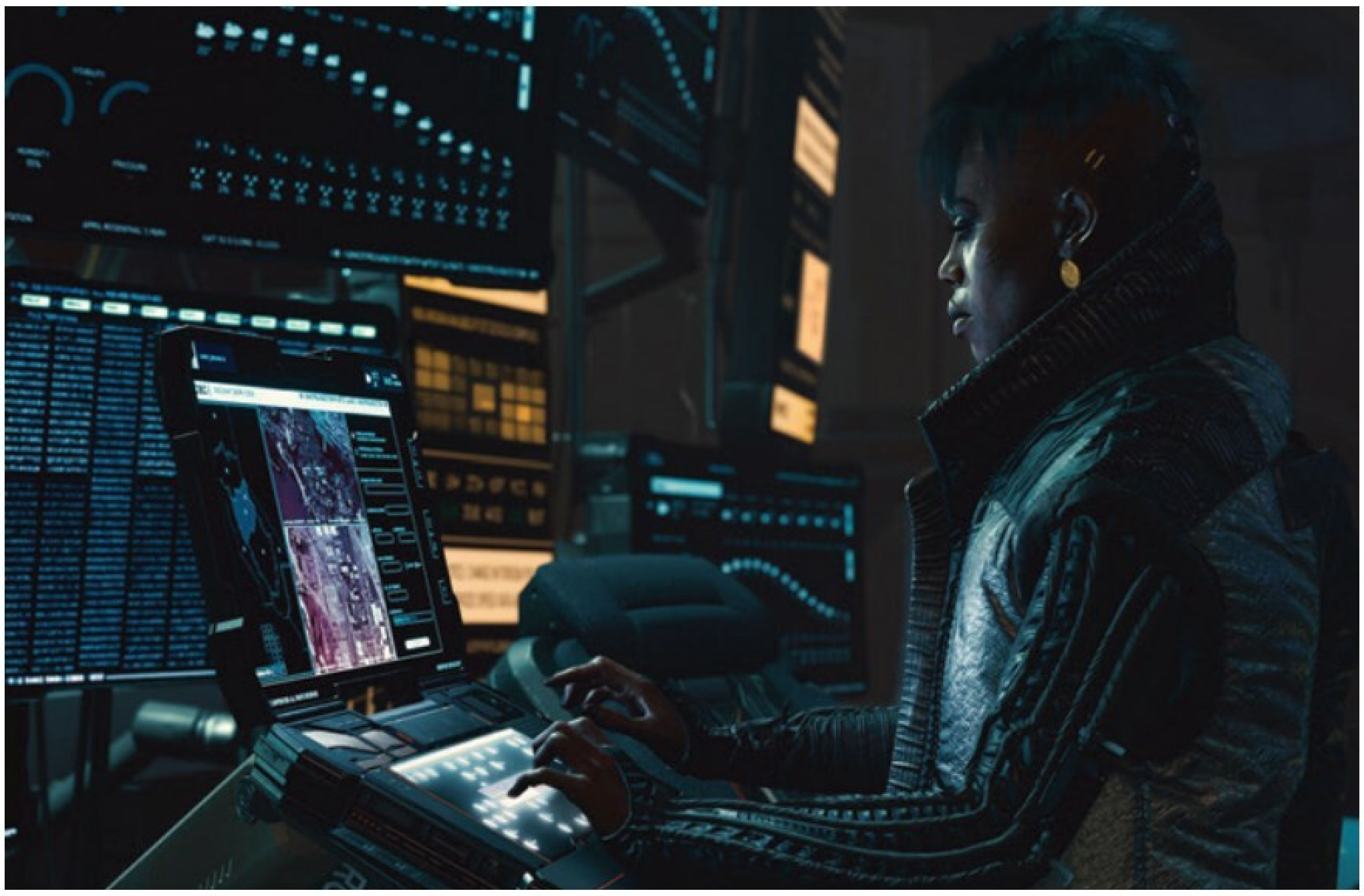
Tomaszkiewicz used the example of how in The Witcher 3, each mission played out in a similar way – with your sword and spells. Cyberpunk 2077 provides multiple solutions for every mission. The E3 demo had this choice on full display, showing covert routes and hackable doors alongside guns-blazing combat with enemy meat shields and turning baddies' turrets against them. "You can open different paths based on what augmentations and skill sets you have," Tomaszkiewicz says. For instance, up your strength enough and you can force open doors with your bare hands, while investing in hacking lets you gain control over robots. At one point, we even hacked into a bench press to drop the weights on an unsuspecting foe pumping iron.

RPG fans who love to tinker with stats and abilities will be happy to know there's a great level of freedom, and it already looks like a much deeper system than The Witcher 3's. You level up your characters' attributes, which can be anything from strength and intelligence to tech ability and "cool," and these determine how far you can progress down certain skill paths. For instance, heavy weapons require a lot of strength, and guns need reflexes. Additionally, augmentations, which can be inserted into slots in your body, like your legs, torso, and nervous system, can change up your gameplay options as they unlock unique perks and can also be upgraded with new powers. Maybe investing in one for your legs gives you double jump and lets you access hidden paths, then later you can upgrade this and get the ability to run silently.

As a reminder, you aren't confined to one class or play style and can pull from multiple skill trees. CD Projekt Red encourages experimentation; after all, that's how you create cool versions of V, such as building your character to be a cyber ninja. "There are a lot of different combinations," Tomaszkiewicz confirms. "The system is built in the way that you can pick and choose. You don't have to specialize in one skill; you can be a hacker and you can also use the katana, or you can use heavy guns but also be a techie.“ Even cool things like your nanowire, which is reminiscent to *Johnny Mnemonic*, can be used both as a weapon and tool. Brandishing it with a quick flourish can make enemies fall to the ground, and you can use it to hack or plant code from a distance.

The demo also shed light on more of Cyberpunk 2077's plot, and it's about much more than just being a mercenary navigating the dangerous and gritty world of Night City. Fully customizable protagonist V is far from your ordinary sellsword, as we find out a strange chip is implanted in V's head. Part of your journey entails finding out more about what this is and what it means. "There is much more going on with the biochip than there seems," says lead designer Miles Tost, hinting that this is a big mystery throughout the game. "To solve this puzzle, it will be up to you and your cyberpunk," he teases.

As you search for answers to the chip, a digital ghost named Johnny Silverhand is at your side, haunting your mind. Silverhand (a character who originated in Mike Pondsmith's Cyberpunk 2020) is played by Keanu Reeves, and yes, his role is much more than cameo. "Keanu's Johnny actually has a huge role in our game," Tomaszkiewicz confirms. "This is like a supporting protagonist. He is present



throughout most of the game."

As the demo neared its end, things took an even more interesting turn as we got our first look at cyberspace. Here a black wall exists; few have gone to the other side and returned, and you're told you will be one of them. We did get a little more context for this. Apparently, an event where viruses and malware were released into the web made it unusable and caused a global crisis that forced corporations to cut off cyber space to the general public. "It is this dark place with many artifacts and secrets and only the most experienced net runners go in there," Tomaszkiewicz explains. "Most users don't go in there, but as you have seen you [are special]."

The possibilities for Cyberpunk's narrative and gameplay are brimming with potential. CD Projekt Red has been one of the top innovators in the RPG genre and has already proven its mastery with storytelling. Now it's time to see how it evolves gameplay in new and exciting ways. This ambition and impressive showing made Cyberpunk 2077 an easy pick for our game of E3 2019.
» Kimberley Wallace

HOTEL
HOTEL

02

FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE

Welcome back to Midgar

Platform: *PS4* ***Style:*** *1-Player Role-Playing* ***Publisher:*** *Square Enix* ***Developer:*** *Square Enix* ***Release:*** *March 3*

After years of relative silence regarding the status and scope of the Final Fantasy VII Remake, Square Enix put an end to fans' speculation by turning E3 2019 into a grand unveiling for the first entry of this ambitious multi-part RPG. Through presentations and a hands-on session, Square Enix answered some of the biggest questions about the gameplay and story. With this new level of clarity, the mystery that once surrounded Final Fantasy VII Remake has transmuted into excitement.

In the early phases of the project, Square Enix referred to Final Fantasy VII Remake as "episodic." That word resulted in some confusion, since it carries specific connotations when referring to video games, like modest budgets and short playtimes. To clear up any misconceptions, producer Yoshinori Kitase (who also directed the original Final Fantasy VII) says each installment of Final Fantasy VII Remake will have as much content as a mainline Final Fantasy game. In essence, the development team is treating each part of the project as a full, numbered entry in the series.

This first installment focuses on the events that propel Cloud and his companions through the city of Midgar. While this portion was only about five hours of the original Final Fantasy VII, the team is expanding it to fill the entire new game, adding content and diving deeper into the characters, relationships, and world. As a result, the experience features fresh surprises mixed with familiar touchstones – like the raid on a Mako Reactor that kicks the story into motion.

Our demo begins with that iconic sequence, as Cloud and Barret storm the reactor. They encounter sinister Shinra Company guards along the way, and these battles provide the first clear picture of how Final Fantasy VII Remake's real-time combat works. As Cloud, you move through the reactor (the map seems practically identical to the original), and battles begin when you get close to an enemy – no random encounters this time. You retain full maneuverability in combat, and can block and roll in addition to executing standard attacks with your enormous sword. You can do this as much as you want; you don't need to wait for your turn in a queue, or watch a meter fill before you can act. However, the series' signature ATB gauge still serves an important purpose.

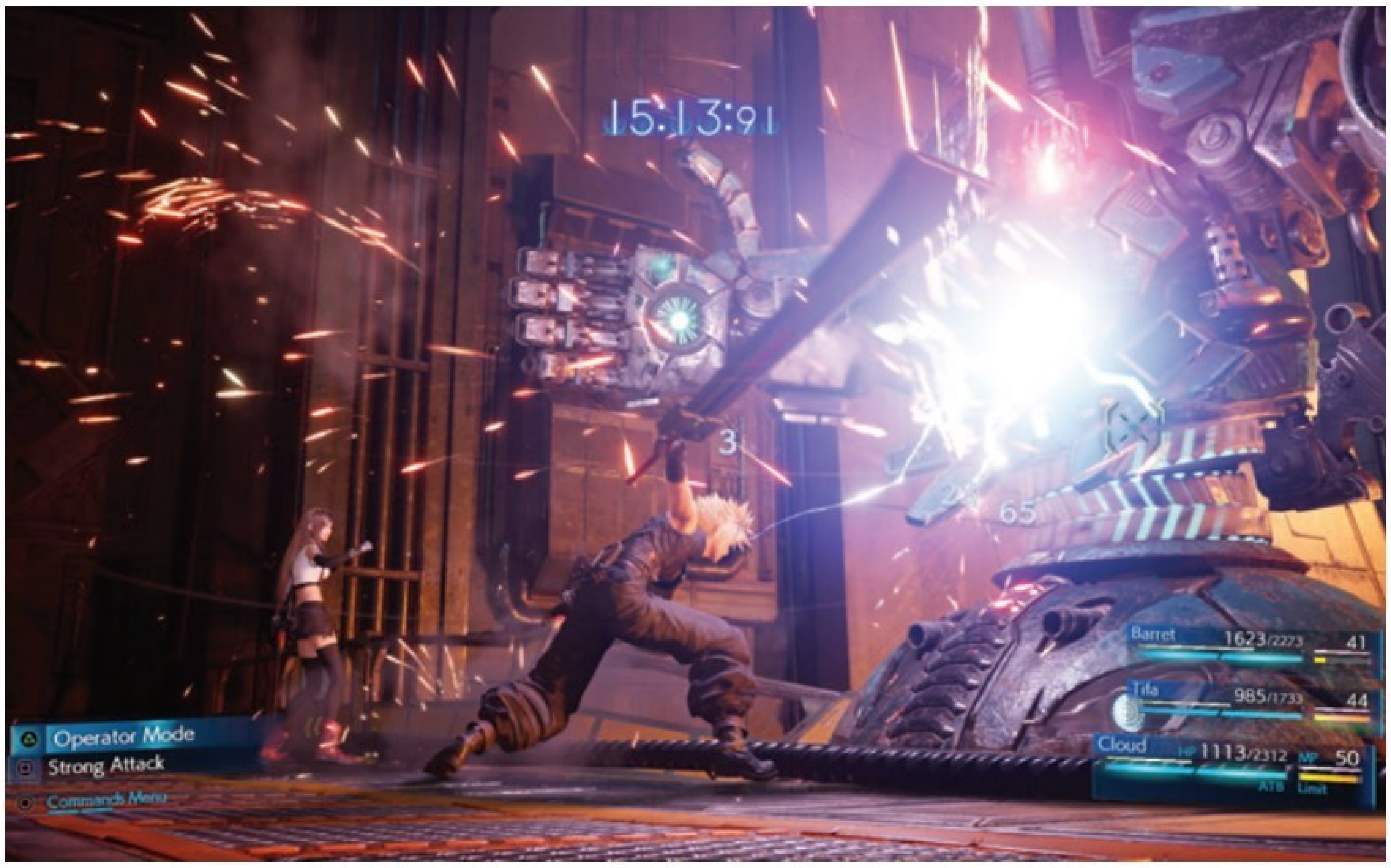
As you deal damage, you fill the ATB gauge to certain thresholds, which function as charges that you can expend to perform

Tempest
Attack
Command Menu
Cloud 1237/2600
Tifa 889/2127
Aerith HP 1008/1938 MP

other actions. For example, using a potion requires an ATB charge, while casting a spell requires an ATB charge and MP. You can also use these charges to perform special moves, like Cloud's familiar Braver attack. A tactical mode (activated with a press of the X button) slows the action to a near-stop, allowing you to select these different options from menus without getting swarmed. However, if you prefer the fast-paced approach, you can also set your favorite moves as shortcuts that don't require you to pause the fight.

You aren't limited to controlling Cloud, either. During combat, you can switch among all of your party members by tapping up or down on d-pad. Every character has their own attacks and style. While Cloud is good for close-quarters fighting, Barret's gun-arm allows him to fire continuously from a distance. Each character also has a special trait (mapped to the triangle button) that opens up unique options, like Cloud's ability to switch between his normal stance and one with slower (but more powerful) strikes.

During our time playing Final Fantasy VII Remake, all of these tactics came together in a boss fight against the Scorpion Sentinel at the heart of the reactor. The combat flow is entertaining and varied; you might use Barret to cast a thunder spell, then swap to Cloud to spend an ATB charge to use Braver, then switch back to Barret to shoot the scorpion once it leaps out of melee range. As you deal damage and exploit weaknesses, you build up a stagger meter that stuns the enemy briefly when full, boosting the damage you inflict. This is an ideal time to use limit-break techniques, like Cloud's Cross-Slash, which we used to finish off the robotic beast and complete the demo.



Many questions remain about the Final Fantasy VII Remake project as a whole. How long will it take to finish? How many games will it span? What other platforms will it release on? Though Square Enix is only speaking vaguely on those points, we know the team is currently scoping out the content for the second installment. But given the size of each game, don't expect the turnaround to be especially quick. Because of that, future installments may release on the upcoming generation of hardware. According to Square Enix CEO Yosuke Matsuda, even the first entry could possibly release on next-gen systems (though no official announcements have been made). Whatever shape the project takes long-term, the game releasing next year seems to deftly leverage nostalgia while putting a fun and modern twist on one of the most beloved RPGs ever made.

» *Joe Juba*

03

WATCH DOGS LEGION

Recruit the world

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Action*
Publisher: *Ubisoft* ***Developer:*** *Ubisoft Toronto* ***Release:*** *March 6*

Seven years ago, the first Watch Dogs was revealed at E3, instantly wowing the audience with its novel concept of an open world that was "hackable" with protagonist Aiden's cellphone. Unfortunately, with both the original game and its sequel (despite improvements), Ubisoft never fully realized that vision of virtual mayhem in the ways we hoped. With this year's announcement of Watch Dogs Legion, however, we may finally see the culmination of the series we've been waiting for.

Watch Dogs Legion is set in post-Brexit London, and the wildest thing of all is that you can recruit and play as anyone in the world. If you want to bring on a waiter from a café you visited and have them fight for your cause, you can, or even grab someone from a story mission. No more Aiden or Marcus; there is no single central character, but instead a unified group of hackers who are all playable. DedSec itself is no longer a handful of young amateurs – it's grown into a large, powerful resistance in a near-future, dystopian England.

"We have created a near future version of the city where technology has taken a dark turn and society is on the brink of collapse," game design director Kent Hudson says. "In short, London is seeing her downfall. It's a time of social crisis: A.I. is devastating the economy, the pound has collapsed and is being replaced by cryptocurrency, organized crime has taken a resurgence."

To recruit new members, which can be anyone from an uptight accountant to a grandma with creaky knees, you have to win them over since everyone in London has an opinion of DedSec. This means completing missions for them, which can be lighthearted like competing in a darts game or something far more sinister, like conducting blackmail. Once on board, you can switch between them and your other recruits with the touch of a button.

Everyone in Watch Dogs Legion has a unique backstory, with social circles as well as activities and occupations they actually frequent in-world. If you kill someone, for example, their spouse can be seen visiting a cemetery for several days during mourning. This could make for fascinating emergent storytelling opportunities for players.

"Even if you recruit a character and go into a cutscene with them, and then recruit a different character and redo the same cutscene with them, they have completely different scripts," creative director Clint Hocking says. "So it's not just different voices and different animations, it's different scripts and different personalities and different personas."

You can mold your resistance to your liking, by customizing their clothes as well as their playstyle. Watch Dogs Legion introduces three new classes to choose from: Hacker, Infiltrator, and Enforcer, and each DedSec member has different stats. Some are better

Westminster
IF I DON'T KNOW YOU I DON'T
ALBION

at melee while others may be best in gunfights. Every class has a unique set of abilities and perks, too. Hackers can use a spider bot (a small, controllable device that can fire like a turret or be controlled remotely to scout out areas or perform takedowns). Enforcers are more combat-focused and use explosive rounds as well as non-lethal sticky mines to lay traps. Finally, Infiltrators are best at stealth and melee. They can disappear from view thanks to an AR cloak for a brief period to pass guards undetected or run from combat. Your characters each have skill trees, and you also have an overarching leveling system for the entirety of DedSec.

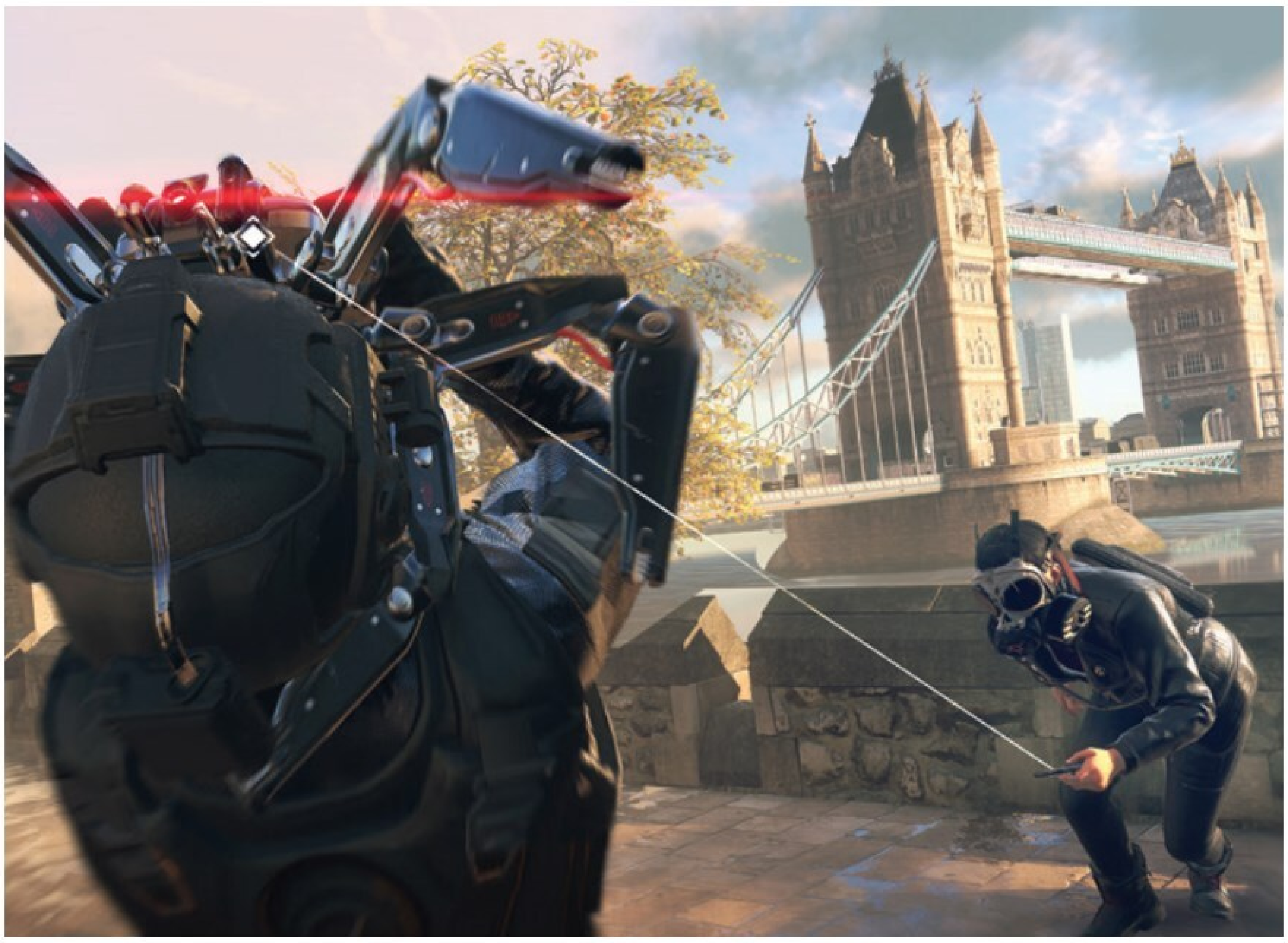
Considering the activist tones in the series, it was sometimes difficult to fully support Marcus or Aiden in their visions when they would use deadly force against opponents. With Watch Dogs Legion, Ubisoft is taking initiative to make half the weapons non-lethal. However, Hocking is hesitant about whether that means you can do a full no-kill playthrough.

"There are some climactic battles and I'll be really clear, if you defeat them with non-lethal weapons, they disappear from the game – just as if you defeated them with lethal weapons," Hocking says. "So it's sort of open to interpretation. I don't want to lead with the message that this is a game where you absolutely will never kill anyone or can choose to never kill anyone. It's not a value for us. I do think we did invest heavily in non-lethal options."

Recruiting individual characters and tweaking them in the ways you want could leave you attached to them, but be careful: members can permanently die. You have a chance to save them before death by surrendering, but this will send your recruit to a nearby hospital and render them temporarily unavailable.

Watch Dogs Legion is ridiculously ambitious, and only time will tell if Ubisoft manages to pull it off, but we're excited even thinking about the possibilities. If done right, this could change how we interact with open worlds and finally embrace that ultimate hacker fantasy we envisioned all those years ago. **» *Elise Favis***

THEATRE
VERITY
BROKEN DREAMS

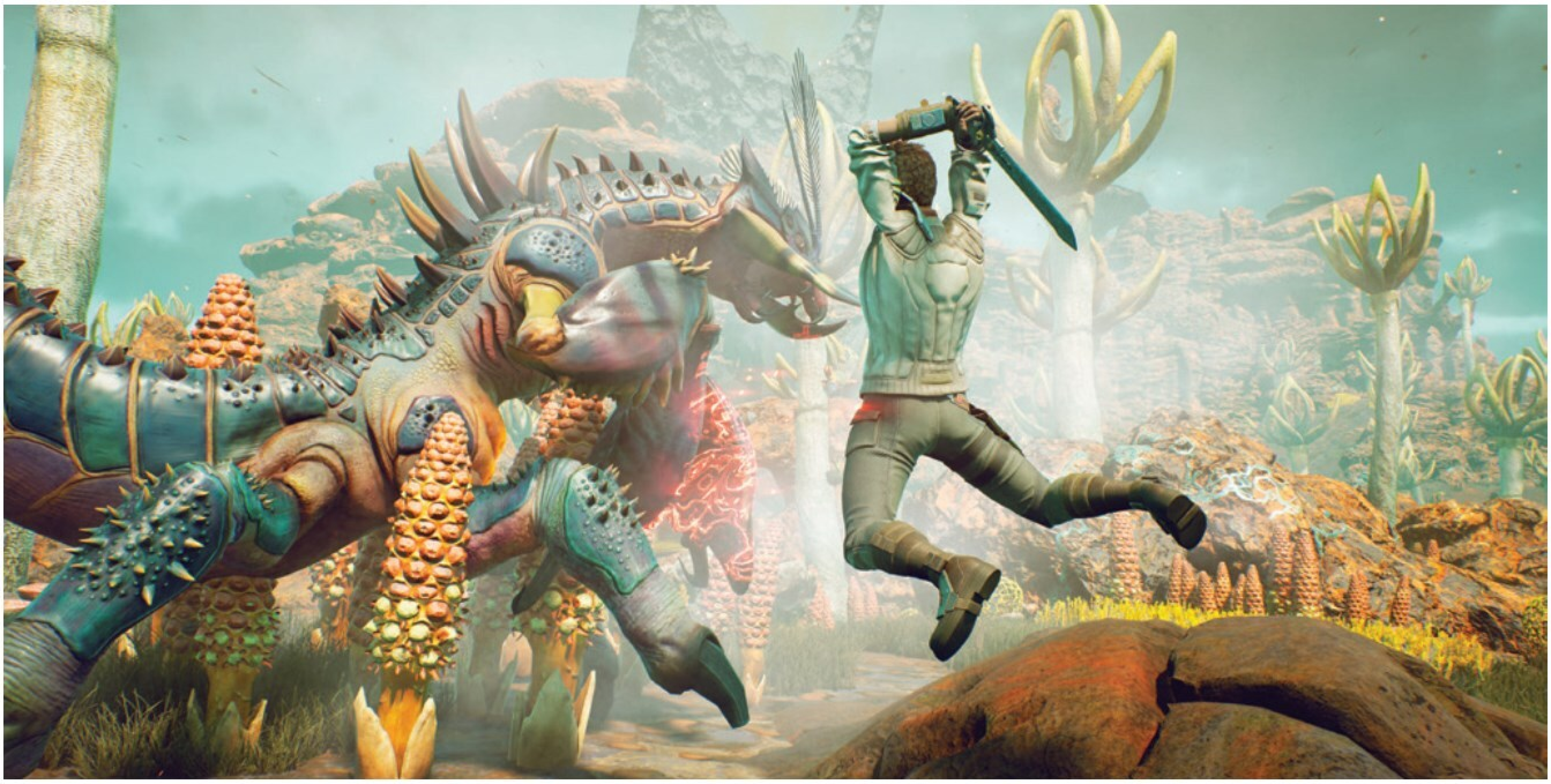


04

THE OUTER WORLDS

Showing off the power of choice

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Action/Role-Playing* ***Publisher:*** *Private Division*
Developer: *Obsidian Entertainment* ***Release:*** *October 25*



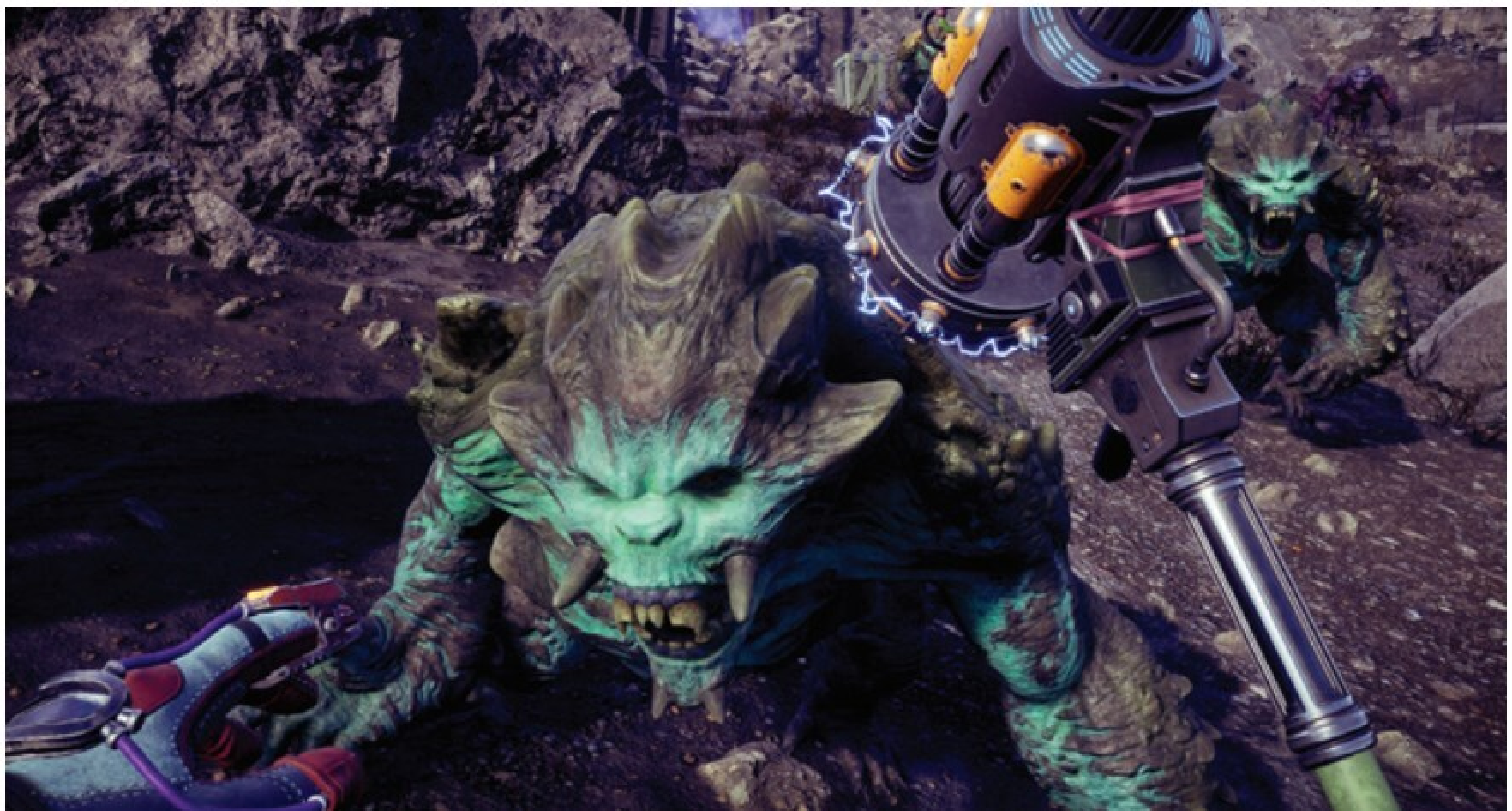
The Outer Worlds has been high on our list of anticipated titles since its announcement, but I was eager to see how the sci-fi adventure might compete against some stiff competition at this year's E3. While much of what was shown at the show simply reinforced an already appealing package, The Outer Worlds proved that its mix of pulp combat, dark humor, and choice-driven role playing is more than enough to hold its own against even the most impressive competition.

Obsidian spent recent months highlighting the planet of Terra 2 and the company towns scattered across its surface. However, we've known for some time that one of the other major locations to explore is a failed terraforming world, now called Monarch. The newest demo finally showed off this locale, which is a moon orbiting a massive gas giant. Due to the unforeseen consequences of terraforming, the native species of Monarch are often monstrous and overgrown, offering plenty of fodder for big and scary creature fights. Monarch is also home to more illicit groups and individuals, cut off from the corporate system that governs much of the rest of the system.

A mob boss in the town of Fallbrook helps to illustrate the lawless vibe of the location as the E3 demo opens. She wants the player to halt the operations of a nearby borscht factory, a particularly disgusting hybrid livestock that produces edible bacon-flavored tumors. From here, the demo diverges to show off The Outer Worlds' most compelling feature – choice. I watched two full playthroughs of the subsequent assault, and each offered dramatically different paths to completion. In one, the player moved through a hidden sewer entrance, unlocking a path that required careful stealth to infiltrate the agricultural facility. In a second playthrough, the player used a piece of tech to take on the appearance of one of the factory workers, and used disguise and quick talking to make an approach.

In both attempts, things eventually devolved into combat, and we saw the tactical time dilation system, a time-slowing effect that supports a more tactical style of play than most first-person shooters. Those battles also showed off yet another new companion – a big game hunter by the name of Nyoka – and her impressive berserker-like laser cannon assaults. She's another face in a growing stable of unusual characters that can join the party, and I'm increasingly eager for some extended hands-on time where I might get to know some of these individuals outside of their combat functionality.

Obsidian has carefully managed expectations around the scope of The Outer Worlds, and I take them at their word that The Outer Worlds doesn't have the game length or breadth of some bigger and more established open-world franchises. Nonetheless, it's gratifying to see that within this limited scope, the team nails a variety of play styles and a high potential for replay. Few things about the game's E3 showing did anything to change my mind about the game, but it certainly didn't diminish my enthusiasm about its potential. **» *Matt Miller***



Hunted Swallier

05

DYING LIGHT 2

Striving for true consequences

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Action (4-Player Online)* ***Publisher:*** *Square Enix* ***Developer:*** *Techland* ***Release:*** *2020*

Many games strive to convey the sense that your choices matter, but Techland looks to push the boundaries with its follow up to 2015's Dying Light. While many elements from the first game are being enhanced, the biggest improvement in Dying Light 2 comes in the form of sweeping changes as a result of player choices.

In my gameplay demo, I witnessed how changes affect both protagonist Aiden Caldwell and the city as a whole. In one instance, pursuing the man who shot your friend (leaving an NPC to tend to his wounds) results in the death of your friend and potentially the end of that questline. Another decision to keep the shooter alive rather than offing him results in the compound you're trying to infiltrate simply opening its doors to you. Had the player killed the assailant, you wouldn't know the signal to open the gates, and you'd have to find another way in.

To craft these scenarios, Techland brought in Chris Avellone (Fallout: New Vegas, Planescape: Torment) as narrative designer for Dying Light 2. "It's one thing to say, 'I have this great open world,' but if there's only one linear storyline that every player follows, that's kind of contrary to the world that's set up," Avellone says. "This is about giving the player more freedom to explore the story as they make their way through the game."

The biggest example of this philosophy I witnessed came at the end of the demo. The player has the choice to carry out their mission to drain a reservoir and deliver safe drinking water to their people, or hear out a shady-yet-convincing NPC who swears he has a better plan. The person playing chose to carry out their mission, and the result empties the nearby lake. Not only does this open up an entirely new area for players to explore, but the final scene hints that a new kind of zombie buried in the lakebed emerges. Techland says based on player choices, you can miss up to half the content of Dying Light 2 in a single playthrough.

In addition to these massive changes to player consequence, Techland adds new moves to add to your parkour arsenal. During a long parkour sequence, I witness Aiden seamlessly chain together moves like sliding, climbing, mantling, wall-running, and the ability to launch off zombies. He can also use tools like a paraglider and a grappling hook to approach parkour sequences and combat in interesting ways.

I went into my Dying Light 2 demo excited to see how Techland was improving upon the well-liked series debut. I emerged blown away by the ambition of the team in both the scope of the choices and the enhanced parkour system. ***» Brian Shea***

06

STAR WARS JEDI: FALLEN ORDER

The little touches that count

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Style:** 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Electronic Arts
Developer: Respawn Entertainment **Release:** November 15

All of the Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order footage shown at E3 was covered in our mammoth 14-page cover story last month, which took you deep into the development halls of Respawn Entertainment to learn exactly what makes this game tick. In the time between the release of that cover story and now, we received numerous questions from readers who wanted to learn things that weren't featured in that article.

I asked many of these questions during a Respawn Entertainment E3 panel I moderated. As we learned on our cover-story trip, game director Stig Asmussen doesn't like to divulge details and was quick to give us a "no comment" for most questions, but did pause for a few seconds when I asked him if space battles would be a part of Jedi: Fallen Order. "I probably shouldn't talk about that," he eventually said with a smile. Given his reaction, I think there's a strong chance Cal will be a part of a space conflict, perhaps even aboard the ship he's come to call home, *The Stinger Mantis*.

Asmussen also addressed the criticism he heard about the demo looking too easy, and quickly shot back that "it's not." Even if a player finds the default setting to lack challenge, Asmussen and his team are actively looking into difficulty settings. "If we wanted to, we could make [the difficulties] extremely difficult to very easy," he said.

Regarding the customizable lightsaber, players can get different blade colors, like orange, which is a preorder bonus, but Asmussen wouldn't divulge whether or not a double-bladed saber was an option. He wouldn't even tell me if my saber could be yellow.

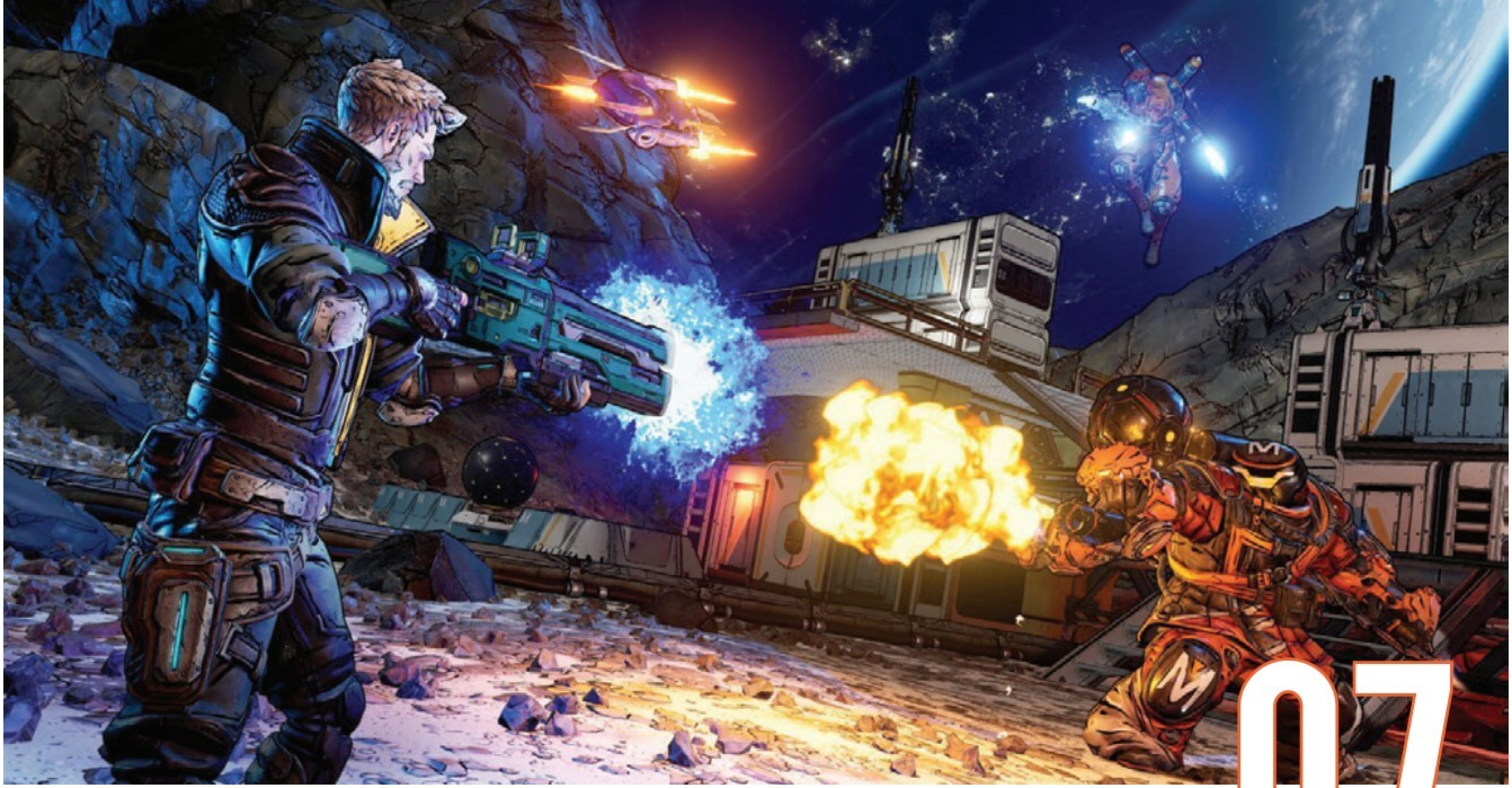
During our visit, Respawn was still working with Lucasfilm to see if dismemberment of any kind would make it into the game, and that decision was made just in time for the E3 demo. For creatures like the Kashyyyk spiders, limbs can be removed with a clean slice of the lightsaber. You may also see heads (and long tongues) of other beasts get lobbed off. Just don't expect to see any dismemberment on human characters, like stormtroopers.

Our second glance of the 30-plus-minute demo at E3 gave us a better read on how dynamic the Force can be in Jedi: Fallen Order. Using Force push, Cal Kestis can knock a speeder bike pilot into a wall, a move dealing a little bit of damage. If he does this same maneuver against a flametrooper, there's a chance the fuel in the backpack will explode, leading to a one-hit kill, as well as splash damage on anyone nearby. The flying corpse of the flametrooper could even collide with another enemy.

On the other end of the spectrum, Cal can use Force pull on Kashyyyk's flame beetles to turn them living grenades. He can pull them toward him, and then propel them at adversaries. When they make contact with an enemy, they explode. Some enemies, like the deadly purge troopers, will anticipate the Force powers. If you pull one, there's a chance he may use the increased movement speed as he flies forward to launch his own eltcroblade attack against you.

Another little touch that wasn't finalized during our visit was the light panel on the back of BD-1's head. Lucasfilm and Respawn were determining if the light should just be one color or if it should be used for BD to emote and help the player. The creators decided on the latter, and BD's light is now green when Cal is in full health, red when he's near death, and blue when BD is exploring on his own.

Jedi: Fallen Order's gameplay debut was met with some skepticism by some fans, who said it looked too linear and easy, but E3 attendees sang a different tune when they actually got their hands on the game and were given the chance to see what advanced combat looks like, as well as how exploration is similar in design to the Metroid series.
» Andrew Reiner



07

BORDERLANDS 3

A goofy, gory reunion

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • Stadia • PC* ***Style:*** *1 or 2-Player Shooter* (4-Player Online)* ***Publisher:*** *2K Games*
Developer: *Gearbox Software* ***Release:*** *September 13*

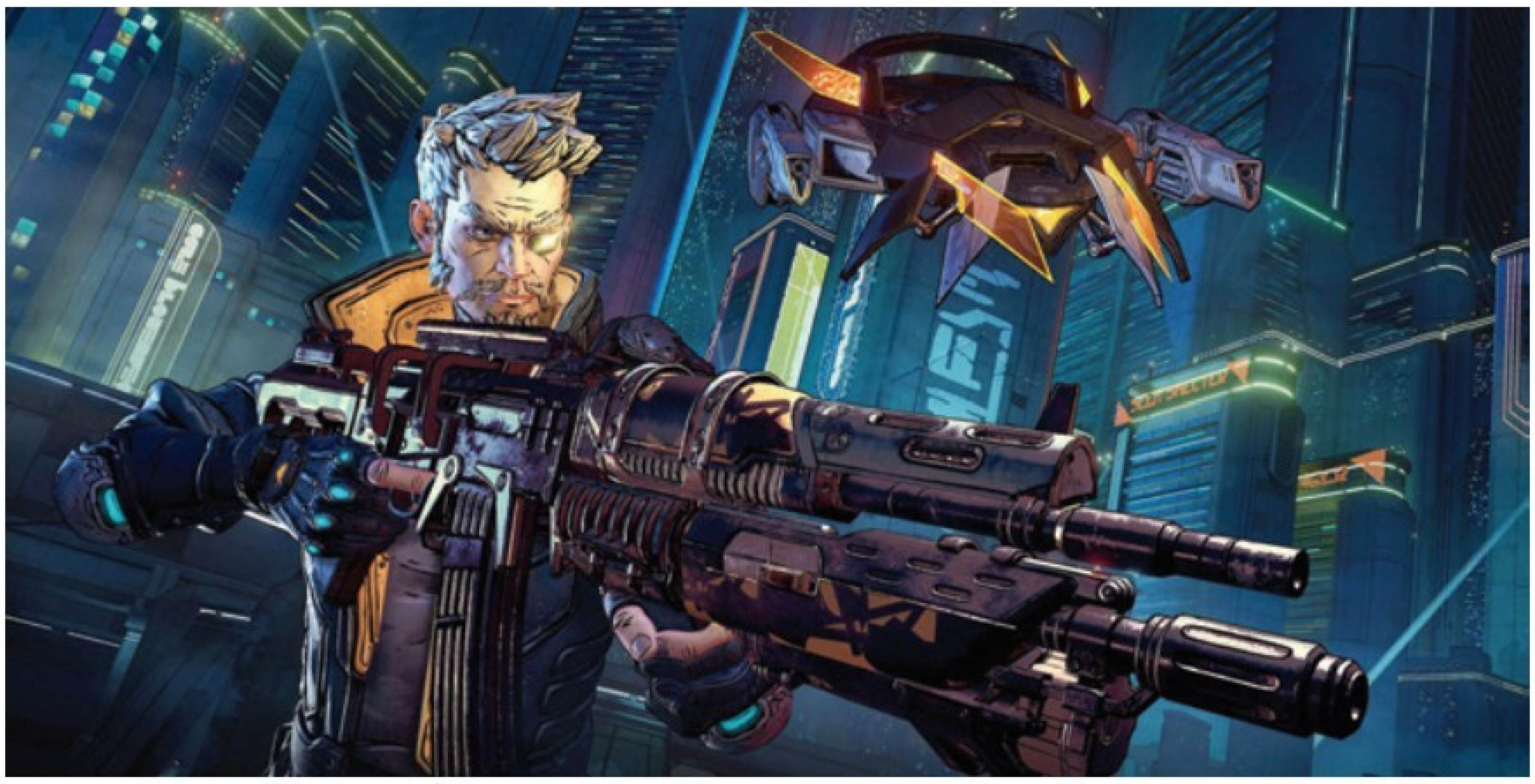
Ever since The Pre-Sequel ended with a big bang, fans of Pandora have been clamoring for another shooty adventure bearing the Borderlands name. Luckily for them, the third game is around the corner and from what we've played, it looks to deliver the same combination of skill trees, gun-blazing, and crude humor that defined the early games – with a few improvements to boot.

On the whole, Borderlands 3 doesn't deviate too much from its predecessors in terms of visuals or gameplay. The same exaggerated, comic book-style characters and environments return, but with sharper corners. Shotguns, sniper rifles, and machine guns all operate the same and feel as satisfying as they did in Borderlands 2, though some new visual effects make lead exchanges a bit more interesting. Bullets rip off limbs, fire turns bandits to ashes, and well-placed sniper rounds transform heads into red mist. These effects help strengthen the sensation that your weapons are doling out serious damage, a nice improvement over simply having damage indicator numbers leaping off bodies in the previous games.

During E3, we played a 30-minute segment as Zane, the stealthy, gadgets-focused operative of the new selectable vault hunters. Zane can spawn barriers, create holographic doubles to distract foes, and even summon a handy drone capable of burning enemies to a crisp. Both Zane's powerful abilities and the wacky weaponry gave us plenty of tactical strategies on the field and entertainment as we tore through foes like knives through string. The barrier ability is extremely handy given that while enemies can't penetrate it, you can, sniping foes and siccing the drone on them from behind the comfort of your temporary blue sanctuary. Speaking of the drone, this nasty little fellow is wonderful, zipping around the field to fight enemies and draw their fire. From what we played, evasion and diversion is Zane's chief skillset. Even without allies there to reap the benefits of my distraction, the power of running circles around foes, peppering them with machine-gun fire, and taking them down one by one is so satisfying. That said, we imagine the action gets more chaotic when you have three other hunters, like Fl4k and his beasts, unleashing their abilities into the mix as well.

Borderlands 3 doesn't rewrite the series' manic playbook, but from our session, it doesn't seem like it really needs to. The familiar humor-tinged combination of powers and gunplay is so fun years later that the combat still feels fresh and challenging. Our more concerning questions extend to the storytelling and villain. In spite of the series' silly tone, Handsome Jack proved to be one of the most diabolical and memorable villains we've seen in a long time, not to mention surprisingly sympathetic. Will the Calypso Twins measure up? And how will the story use such beloved characters like Rhys and Brick? We look forwarding to finding out answers come September and cracking open a lot of bandit skulls in the process. **» *Javy Gwaltney***

*Local multiplayer only available on PS4 and Xbox One



08

CONTROL

Bending reality in strange ways

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Action* ***Publisher:*** *505 Games*
Developer: *Remedy Entertainment* ***Release:*** *August 27*

Remedy Entertainment has long brought a tinge of weird to its games, like Alan Wake experiencing paranormal events come to life from his novel, and the experimental mix of television and gaming in the time-bending story of Quantum Break. Control, Remedy's next title, similarly embraces the strange and introduces one of its most delightfully bizarre premises yet.

You play as Jesse Faden, a young woman seeking answers to mysterious supernatural happenings. To get to the bottom of it, she visits the Oldest House, the home of a paranormal investigative branch called the Federal Bureau of Control. With supernatural abilities at Jesse's fingertips and an unpredictable environment that shifts at a moment's notice, Control is turning out to be both intriguing and entertaining.

At E3, we played nearly an hour of Control. In this demo, I had a restricted amount of abilities because it takes place early on. At first, I could only use melee, Launch (which allows you to push/pull objects or people in midair), and two forms of my shifting gun (these included Grip, similar to a standard pistol, and Shatter, which triggers explosive blasts). As you progress, you can find mods, which are basically perks for both Jesse's character and her weapon. For example, some may increase her health, whereas a gun mod could increase headshot damage or lower a cooldown.

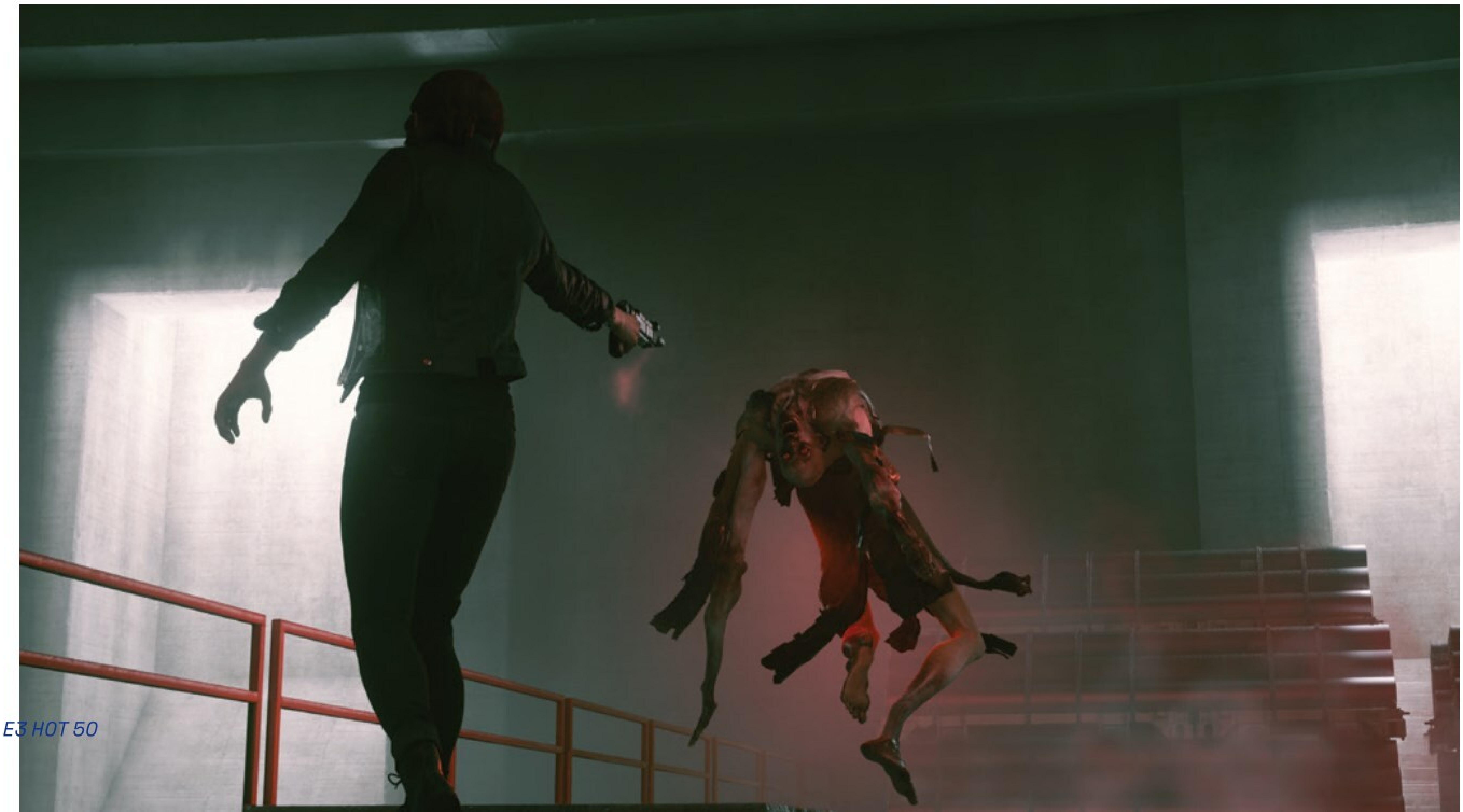
Combat is smooth and dynamic; it's a lot of fun to Launch all kinds of objects, from desks to couches, at enemies to topple them off their feet. The particle effects are detailed, too, so everything feels satisfyingly destructive. New enemies I encountered were challenging, especially a type called Hiss Charged. These look like contorted zombies that hover above the ground and explode when they're near death. This meant I had to be careful about when I dealt a final blow.

Acquiring new abilities requires you to complete side quests that bring you to the Astral Plane, an otherworldly zone where you must pass a trial to successfully bind to a power. These act as comprehensive tutorials. For example, I had to swiftly use Evade to avoid being crushed by walls that opened and closed in quick succession. The Astral Plane has an ambiguous and mysterious look; a large inverted pyramid hangs in the sky and a white backdrop gives the sense that the world goes on forever. I'm curious about how Remedy makes use of it for boss battles (we briefly saw one during the cover-story trip) and story moments.

Speaking of story, we learn more about Jesse's motivations. It turns out she's not just here for herself, but also to find her brother that went missing when they were young after an incident with the supernatural.

"The bureau investigates these strange phenomena that happen around the world, and then study them contain them," game director Mikael Kasurinen says. "So they came and took her brother. [Jesse] managed to escape. Ever since then, she wanted to find out what happened to him."

With its intrigue and solid combat, Control is showing potential. We're excited to see how it all fares in the final product when it releases later this summer. **» *Elise Favis***

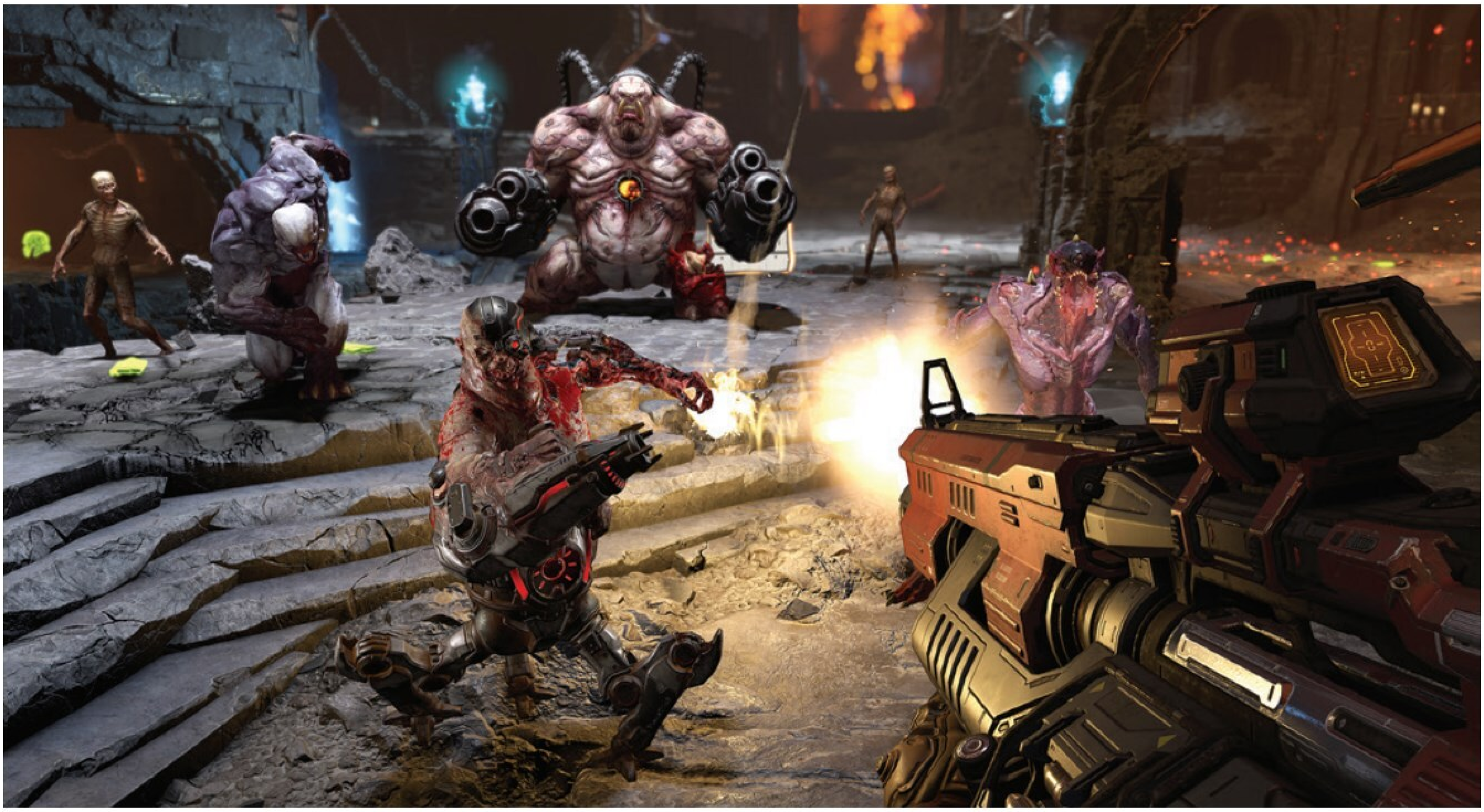


DOOM ETERNAL

09

Doom Slayer learns parkour skill kills

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • Stadia • PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Shooter (3-Player Online)*
Publisher: *Bethesda* ***Developer:*** *id Software* ***Release:*** *November 22*



After years of struggling to modernize the shooter widely credited with popularizing the genre, id Software finally struck gold again with the 2016 Doom reboot. The shredding metal soundtrack, comic-book violence, and kinetic gunplay captured and improved nearly everything that made the original a blockbuster and shotgunned the game back into the public consciousness. After spending an hour in the bloody trenches with the sequel, Doom Eternal, we can confidently say the Doom Slayer is in a great position to continue kicking ass.

Doom Eternal doesn't stray too far from the reboot's gameplay, and that's a good thing. To survive the overwhelming onslaught of demons, you must keep moving and shooting, sometimes going against your instinct and charging headlong into a demon pack in order to procure more ammo with a chainsaw finisher.

"We felt like ultimately, [using the chainsaw] was so much more satisfying than just overfilling the levels with resources everywhere so you're tripping over them," says creative director Hugo Martin. "We decided to steer into it with [Doom Eternal] and say, 'That felt really good. What else can we do to allow you to take what you need when you need it from the bad guys that you're killing?'"

Cutting through enemies with a chainsaw still procures a healthy ammo resupply, but now you have three other techniques for collecting specific drops. Glory kills reward health, burning enemies with the flame belch shoulder attachment yields armor, and stringing together glory kills powers up your Blood Punch super – a new rune-activated skill that lets you take down an enemy with one brutal punch.

To help players better manage supplies mid-battle, id redesigned the user interface to give it a bright neon sheen. The revamp turned into a lightning rod of criticism online, but Martin says this change was functional, not aesthetic. "In this game, I'm in a racecar," he says. "Dude, if you have something to tell me, tell me loud and tell me fast. That's really why we do everything with the glowing one-ups, the floating question marks, and the huge health packs."

Doom Eternal keeps its gory combat front-and-center, but expect to do a lot more platforming. The Doom Slayer is more agile now thanks to some new tools. The meat hook mod attachment for the super shotgun allows him to swing from enemies like a grappling hook, the new gloves let him scale particular walls, and the dash helps him cross wide expanses. With all these new traversal mechanics at players' disposal, id created more diverse and vertical environments that require skill to navigate. This all ties into the studio's plans for filling levels with secrets and collectibles.

"We are busting our ass to make sure that every aspect of the game has real meaning for the player," Martin says. "If you see like a ledge down there leading to a little tunnel, you're like, 'I bet you there's something down there.' When you go in there, it's going to be worth your time."

The rewards for exploration may also include lore that fans have been dying to learn. Those who look beyond the bloodshed can learn more about the origin of the Doom Slayer and whether or not he's the same guy from the original Doom. Tidbits about his past will be revealed as he travels through Mars, hell, Earth, and even heaven.

We'll find out for sure if it's worth our time in late November, but we like the Doom Slayer's odds. **» *Matt Bertz***

10

CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE

Gaining every tactical advantage

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Shooter (Online TBA)* ***Publisher:*** *Activision*
Developer: *Infinity Ward* ***Release:*** *October 25*

Reimagining a video game from its foundations requires a certain artistry. Developers have to be willing to strip away everything that made a title beloved and then rebuild it brick-by-brick, smoothing and shaping as they go for a new world and potentially a new audience. This is the task Infinity Ward set for itself with Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, a brand-new title that bears the same name as the 2007 game that set the gaming world on fire and launched the series into the stratosphere.

At E3 this year, Activision and Infinity Ward showed the campaign again, this time focusing on a bomb going off in the London streets. At a police blockade, officers are manually checking every car and driver. As they approach a white van with tinted windows, the driver speeds off into the distance, barely getting 30 feet out before the van explodes and takes the city block with it. This incident kicks off a massive terrorist hunt.

Much like previous Modern Warfare titles, the story bounces around between different perspectives. In the first reveal, Captain Price was shown with his familiar trademark mustache, though with a new actor different from his previous portrayals. Infinity Ward likened the change in actor, now Barry Sloane, to the legacy of James Bond, where the right spirit matters for the casting more than trying to find someone who looks identical. For this showing, the game plays through the perspective of the Tier 1 Police. This group charges through and neutralizes a townhome housing accused terrorists. This section highlights how important lighting could be for the gameplay, with the player character shooting out lamps and using night-vision goggles to get the jump on the enemy with a heavy shotgun at the ready.

Modern Warfare places a heavy emphasis on adaptability. Players have the tools at their disposal to deal with any situation and any enemy action. When players push their guns against the wall, the gun angles so that shots can be fired in directions that typically aren't available to first-person cameras. If an enemy is hiding against an adjacent wall, breaching rounds help disable them before the player enters the room. Going prone is even an option when there's only a small gap underneath a door to peek through.

While Infinity Ward is not ready to talk about multiplayer yet, it teased a few details during E3. Special Ops, a series of single-player or co-op missions that are almost arcade-like espresso shots of the main game's environments, make a return in Modern Warfare. The mode was originally inspired by the first Modern Warfare's famous Mile High Club mission and is credited with some of the series' most intense moments.

It is difficult for a developer to convey what they believe a reimagining to be, especially as Infinity Ward is being careful to not call Modern Warfare a reboot, but the newest Call of Duty title seems to be shaping up to be exactly as they describe it. Infinity Ward is rethinking the game from the same foundations it started with over a decade ago and making a Modern Warfare that might line up to its namesake's reputation.
» Imran Khan

11

FIRE EMBLEM: THREE HOUSES

A daring gambit

Platform: Switch **Style:** 1-Player Strategy **Publisher:** Nintendo **Developer:** Intelligent Systems, Koei Tecmo **Release:** July 26

Fire Emblem has always been about challenging players' expectations and throwing their comfort level out the window. With each new entry, Intelligent Systems devises major thematic changes and risks like combining warfare with romantic matchmaking or weaving together an epic story that requires the player to spend 90 hours across three games to complete. Three Houses takes a sledgehammer to the series' foundation and builds the riskiest and most ambitious entry since Awakening from the ground up.

Three Houses is divided into two acts. The first section of the game has you serving as a professor at Garreg Mach monastery (think Hogwarts but for military leaders, knights, and mages), where nobles and commoners from each of the three kingdoms on the continent come for their education. You select your house at the beginning of the game and are charged with teaching the students within that house, though you can also recruit students from other houses into yours if you're willing to do the work. This section plays out like the social-simulation aspects of Persona, with you building relationships with students. With classroom lessons and skirmishes against bandits and monsters, you can train your students and help them build life-long friendships among their peers. Be careful though. If you have the permadeath option switched on, they can be lost forever in these skirmishes.

Five years pass between the first and second act, with some unrevealed event launching all three houses into a war. You've automatically sided with the house that you selected at the start of the game. However, you still must confront the fact that many of your "enemies" are the classmates of your students and may even be former students you have interacted with. Having the entire first section of the game serve as a detailed prologue to all the misery of warfare is a risk in itself, given the series' penchant for throwing players headlong into the fray. However, Intelligent Systems isn't content to stop there.

Fire Emblem's weapons triangle has formed the foundation of the series combat ever since the first entry. Sure, there have been tweaks and expansion upon the rock, paper, scissors structure, but Three Houses marks the first time Fire Emblem throws the triangle to the wayside. Experienced players will find themselves in the same boat as newcomers to the series, having to master a new system built around special moves called Combat Arts that affect certain enemies more than others. Players must learn characters' specialties instead of simply having blind faith that their swordsmen will triumph over an axe wielder. New mechanics, like stat-boosting battalion units and the ability to make any character any class, also help push battles in new directions.

Even with Fire Emblem's penchant for taking risks, Three Houses charts new territory for the series and we can't wait to see the fruits of those efforts. **» *Javy Gwaltney***

12

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES II

Clawing your way up the food chain

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Role-Playing* ***Publisher:*** *Paradox Interactive*
Developer: *Hardsuit Labs* ***Release:*** *2020*

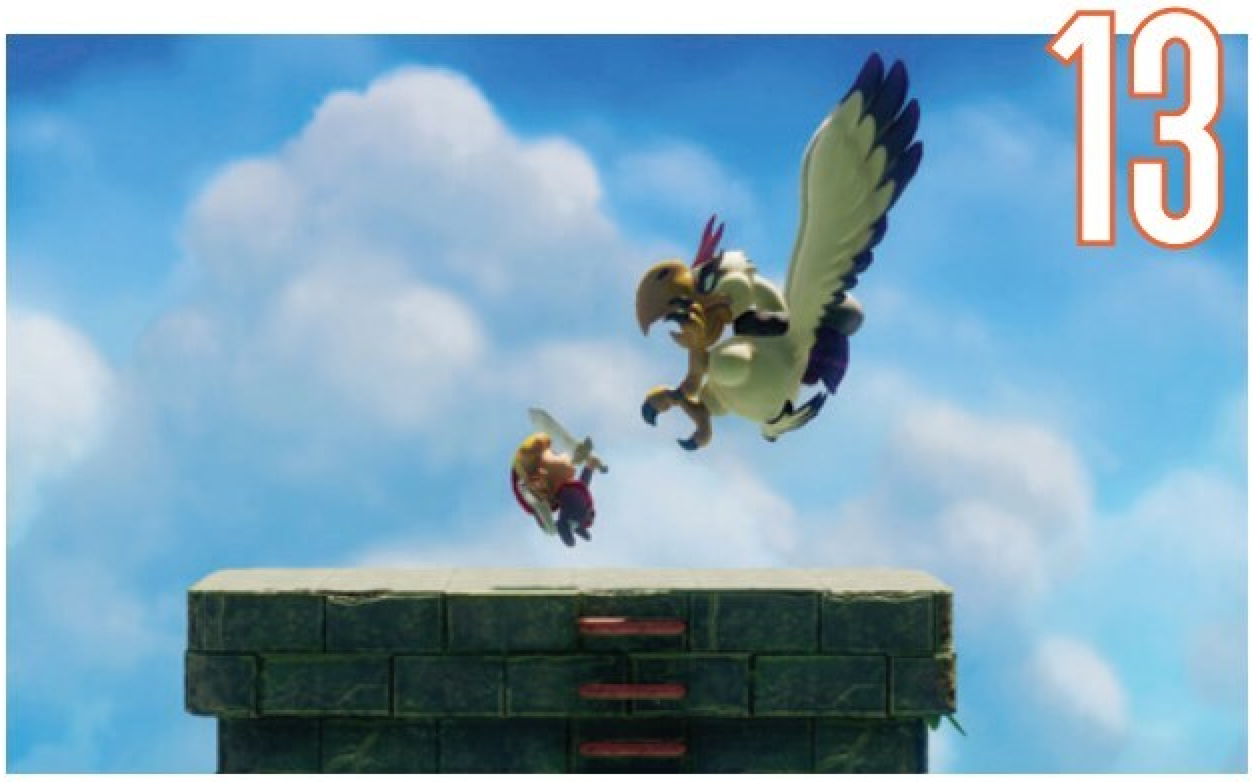
Over the years, Vampire: The Masquerade – Bloodlines has emerged as one of gaming's most cherished cult classics thanks to its darkly enchanting portrait of modern Los Angeles, where vampires operate under a strict law known as the Masquerade to keep humanity unaware they exist. We checked out the unexpected sequel at E3 and came away with the impression Bloodlines II might prove to be the strong successor the original deserves.

Set in modern-night Seattle, Bloodlines 2 casts you as a "thinblood" inducted into this world of darkness struggling to survive in a cutthroat society filled with vampires, werewolves, and other things that go bump in the night. Described by senior narrative designer Cara Ellison as a "grounded crime drama," Hardsuit Labs wouldn't go into specifics about the main plot. However, the beats we saw in our demo are largely the same as the original: You create a character and then serve as an errand boy/gal for the various vampire clans. However, unlike the first game, the choices you make in your playthrough can dramatically shift your relationships among those clans as you make a name for yourself in the World of Darkness.

Hardsuit loaded up a game where our thinblood has taken on a quest from an unknown clan to hunt down and collect information from a Nosferatu named Slugg. Our client, a mysterious woman with red hair, tells us to check in with the Nosferatu down in the sewers for information to his whereabouts. When you do this, the Nosferatu gatekeeper tells you where Slugg is, but also gives you a counter-offer: Bring back Slugg and the Nosferatu will offer him protection in exchange for the information he has.

When you reach Slugg, hidden away far from the world in Seattle's homeless encampment, a number of options present themselves. You can beat him into submission until he gives you the information and then let him go or execute him. You can also just charm him into giving you the information, offer him the sanctuary and convince him to go there. Offering him sanctuary means you gain some favor with the Nosferatu and subsequently receive quests that you wouldn't otherwise be able to access. Slugg might also come back later with something nice to give you. However, once you tell your client what happened, she expresses her displeasure at your failure and threatens you with vague but menacing violence. Vice versa: Bringing that information back to her puts you in that clan's favor and at odds with the Nosferatu. Hardsuit says that plenty of choices await for you that will change your social standings and the activities you have access to during the course of your playthrough, making Bloodlines II fertile soil for memorable player-driven stories (and replayability).

The original Bloodlines excelled at creating a fascinating world and it looks like the sequel is going to arm players with even more ways to interact and shape it. For wannabe vampires everywhere, 2020 can't come soon enough. **» *Javy Gwaltney***



13

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: LINK'S AWAKENING

Design your dream dungeons

Platform: Switch **Style:** 1-Player Action/Adventure
Publisher: Nintendo **Developer:** Nintendo
Release: September 20

The announcement of a Link's Awakening remake earlier this year was met with excitement from fans, and after going hands-on with the game myself, it appears to capture what made the original Game Boy release special. But Link's Awakening does more than re-tell a familiar story; the announcement of a new dungeon-creation mechanic raises our anticipation to new levels.

Rather than giving you free reign over your creations (like Super Mario Maker), the Link's Awakening creation tools let you arrange rooms of dungeons you've cleared in order to design your own gauntlet. "We know creating puzzles in dungeons is very hard to come up with on your own," series producer Eiji Aonuma says. "I was a dungeon creator for a while, so I understand it can be a very hard thing to complete. We wanted to make something that's easy to arrange for anybody, so we thought just rearranging the rooms would be a fun experience."

Playing through created dungeons yields rewards such as Fairy Bottles. We don't yet know if players can share their creations online, but Aonuma chuckled when I asked him. "Maybe another time I can present a bit more for you," he says.

Outside of the dungeon creator, the gameplay feels modern and fluid, similar to how A Link Between Worlds played like a more modern A Link to the Past. Since the Switch has more face buttons than the Game Boy, being able to map more items to buttons is a new luxury. While I didn't get to play any of the side-scrolling platforming sequences, Aonuma assures me they play a lot like they did in the original version.

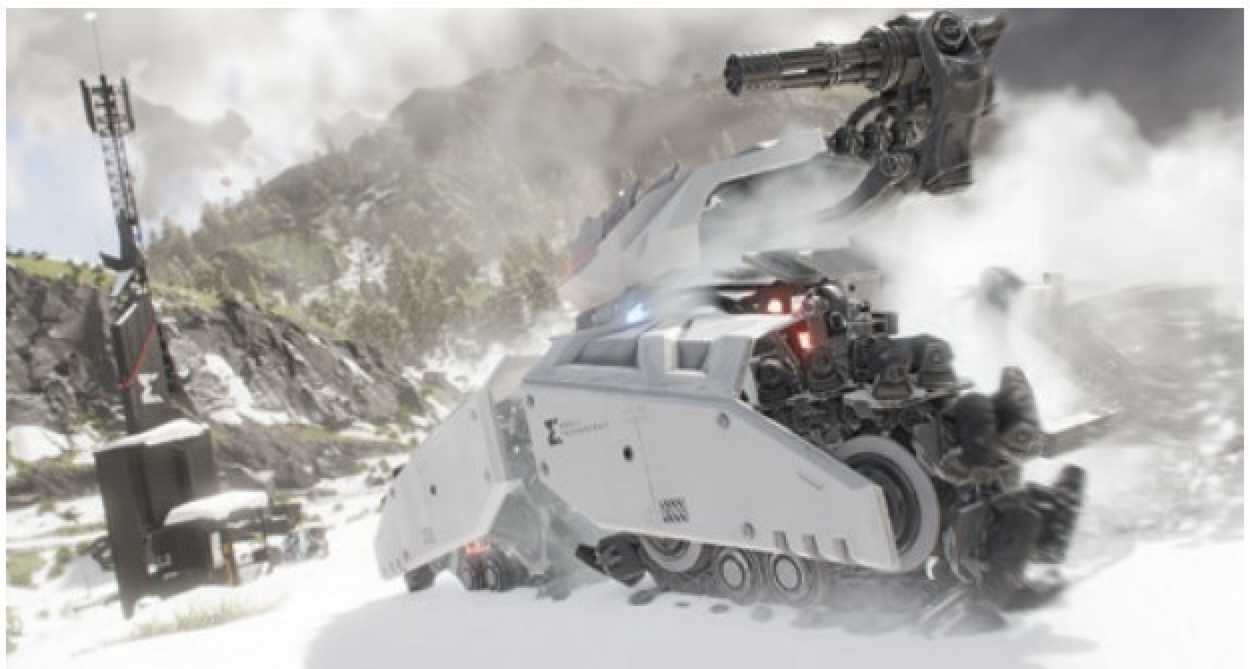
If you've never played Link's Awakening, this looks like the perfect way to explore Koholint Island for the first time. Even if you have experienced this adventure before, this remake is shaping up to be a dream come true. **» *Brian Shea***

14

GHOST RECON BREAKPOINT

Ubsiosft plays the long game for its next open-world shooter

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • Stadia • PC
Style: 1-Player Shooter (4-Player Online) **Publisher:** Ubisoft
Developer: Ubisoft Paris **Release:** October 4



The biggest news coming out of Ghost Recon Breakpoint's E3 showing was a reversal of course. The chorus of disdain that followed Ubisoft's decision to remove A.I. squadmates was loud enough that the developer announced plans to add them back into the game post-launch. At least we know the team is listening.

You ghosts may want to listen as well when exploring the island of Auroa, because if you hear the sound of a behemoth drone barreling down on your position, you should probably get the hell out of there. These end-game enemies are stationed around critical communications towers on the island, and we squared off with one of them during our E3 demo.

Regular enemies drop with headshots, but these mechanical monsters are much spongier. Concentrated firepower and explosives like rocket launchers and EMPs are required to neutralize these threats. The behemoths detect you easier and are super deadly, so if you're not leveled up enough to take them on, avoiding conflict is wise.

Behemoths are only one slice of the endgame content Ubisoft plans to release with Breakpoint. The studio also plans to keep the narrative going via a Faction Mission system. Each day, players will have access to numerous missions centered on the Homesteaders, a group of anti-industrialists, and the Outcasts, another group who we know little about right now.

"[The Faction Mission system] gives more depth to the world and the experience that offers players the opportunity to go off the narrative and engage with the world in a different manner," says Breakpoint writer Emil Daubon. "You gain perks and buffs from fighting these other missions, which still support that overarching narrative of the mystery of what happened on Auroa."

Ubisoft hopes that alongside the traditional multiplayer and planned content drops, these activities should give Breakpoint a long tail just like Wildlands. **» *Matt Bertz***

15

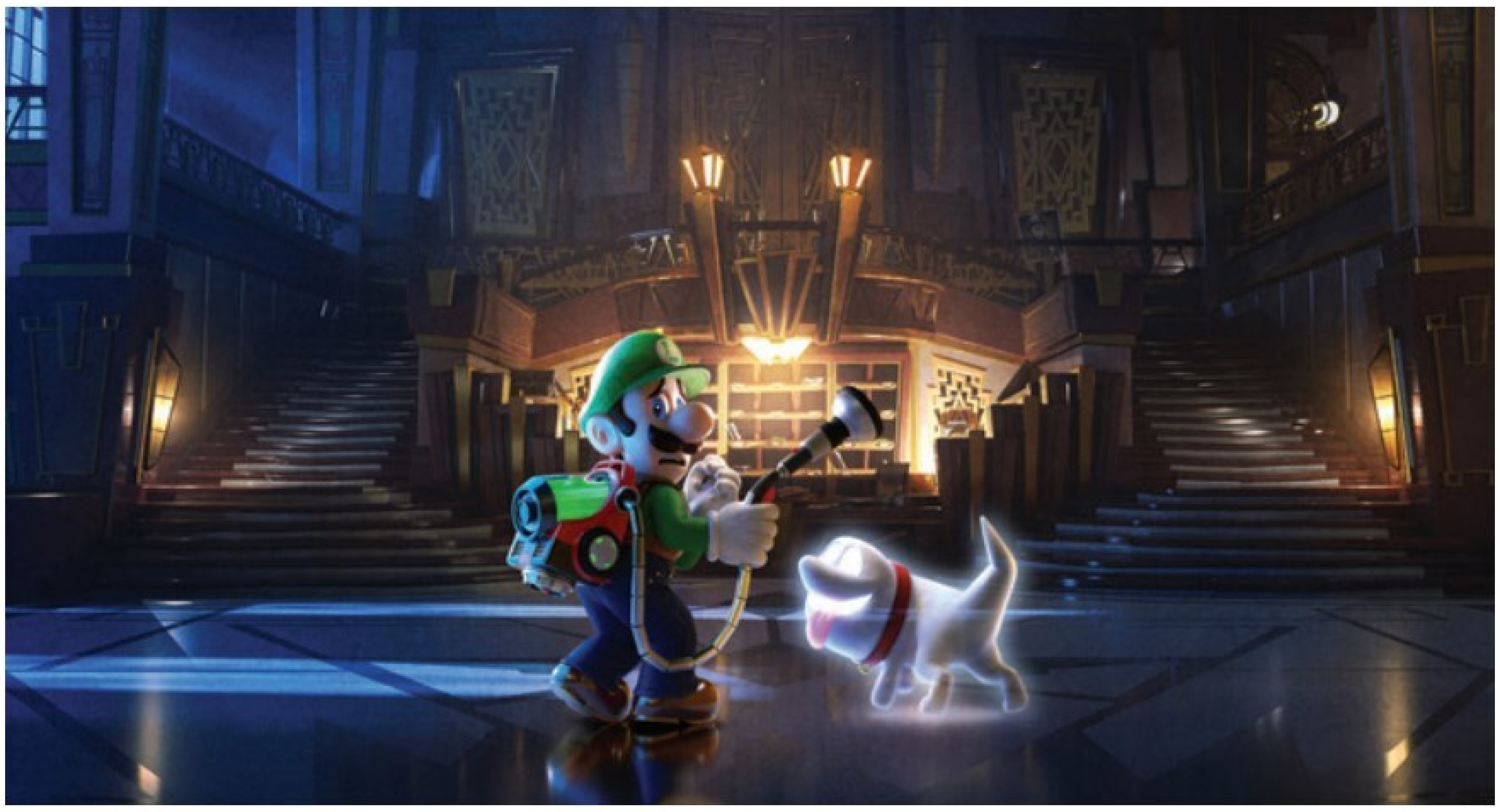
LUIGI'S MANSION 3

Green with fear

Platform: *Switch* ***Style:*** *1- Player Action (8-player Online)* ***Publisher:*** *Nintendo*
Developer: *Next Level Games* ***Release:*** *Winter*

Luigi was hoping to have a relaxing vacation at an opulent resort hotel, but when King Boo kidnaps Mario, Peach, and the Toads, everyone's second-favorite plumber is left to fend for himself. Fortunately, Luigi has dealt with this kind of spectral horror before, so he straps on one of Professor E. Gadd's ghost-sucking Dustbusters and sets off to clean the haunted house.

Unlike Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon, which was scattered across a series of mansions, the third game in the series returns to the concept of exploring a single building. However, the hotel in Luigi's Mansion 3 is composed of a variety of themed floors. We explored a medieval section of the hotel, but also caught glimpses of areas themed after gardens and Hollywood. Each floor of the hotel features its own unique gameplay elements. For example, the Hollywood-themed floor contains a number of haunted televisions Luigi can warp among.

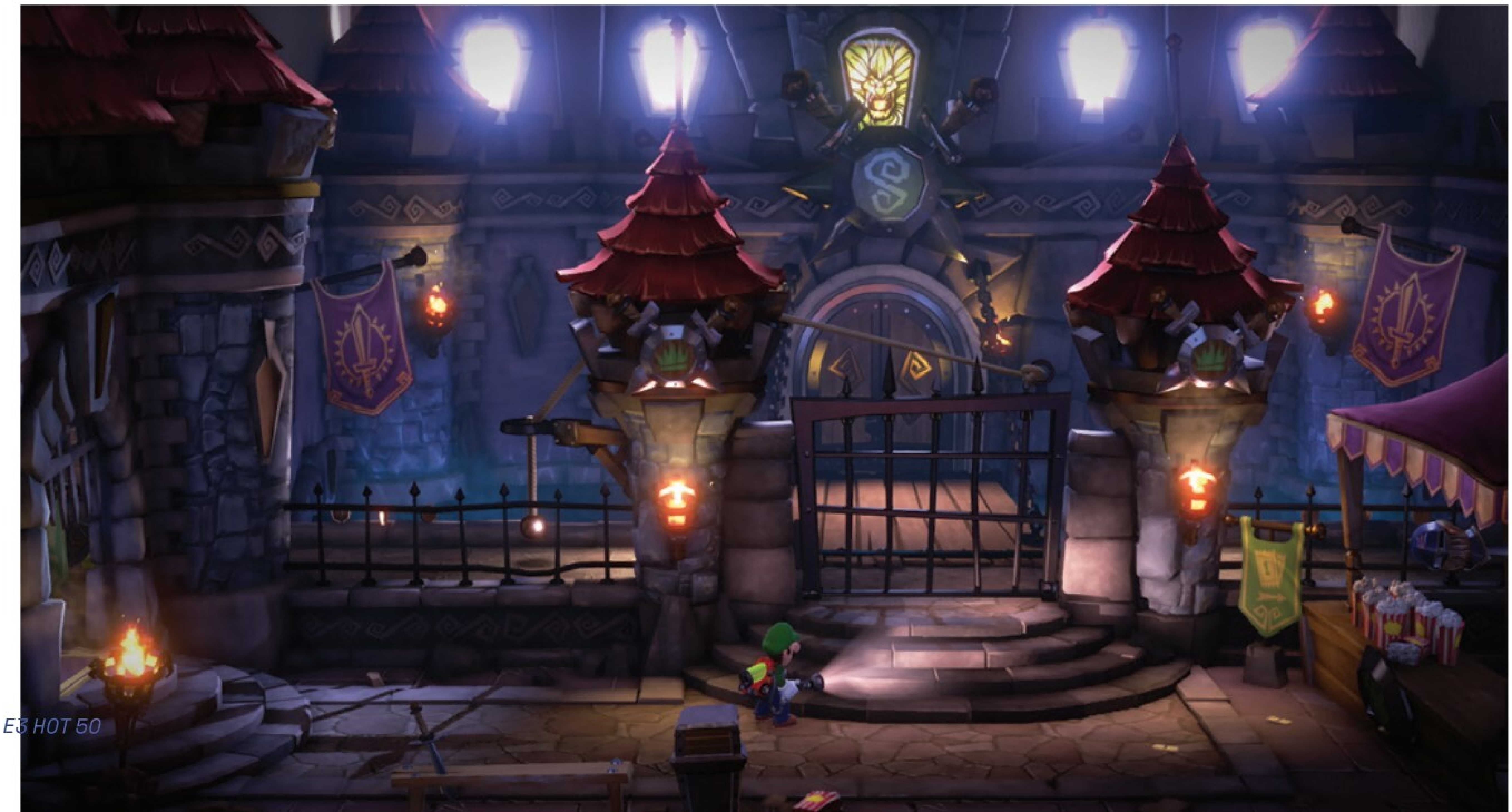


Luigi's new Poltergust G-00 contains a number of new ghost-hunting features. As usual, Luigi can use the Poltergust's flashlight to stun ghosts before sucking them into a storage tank. However, now Luigi can also slam stunned ghosts against the floor and other objects to do more damage and suck them up faster. Luigi can even smack ghosts into each other to make quick work of groups. When Luigi is overwhelmed, he can use a new move called burst, which disperses a gust of air in all directions. Not only does burst push enemies back, it also disarms some ghosts. The Poltergust's final trick is called suction shot, and this little plunger device attaches to objects in the environment, allowing Luigi to grab and drag obstacles out of his way.

Luigi may have lost his entire family to this hotel of horrors, but he doesn't have to travel the haunted halls alone. At any point, Luigi can summon Gooigi, a gooey green doppelganger who possesses all of Luigi's moves and abilities. Gooigi can help Luigi move larger objects that are too big for one person, and he can slide through obstacles like chain-linked fences to reach areas that that are otherwise inaccessible. However, Gooigi isn't invulnerable; he dissolves on contact with water. In the single-player campaign, players can switch between Luigi and Gooigi, but in co-op, a second player can take control of Gooigi.

Players looking for even more multiplayer action should check out the new ScareScrapper mode. Similar to the multiplayer mode in Dark Moon, this eight-player mode tasks players with exploring several floors of a procedurally generated hotel. A variety of different game types within ScareScrapper ask players to either clear out all the ghosts, find a number of hidden polterpups, or race to the exit within a set time limit.

The Luigi's Mansion games are incredibly offbeat, but Luigi's third solo outing looks to be as entertaining as his first two. The Poltergust G-00 has more ghost-catching tricks than ever before, and Nintendo's haunted backdrops look full of all-ages slapstick. **» *Ben Reeves***

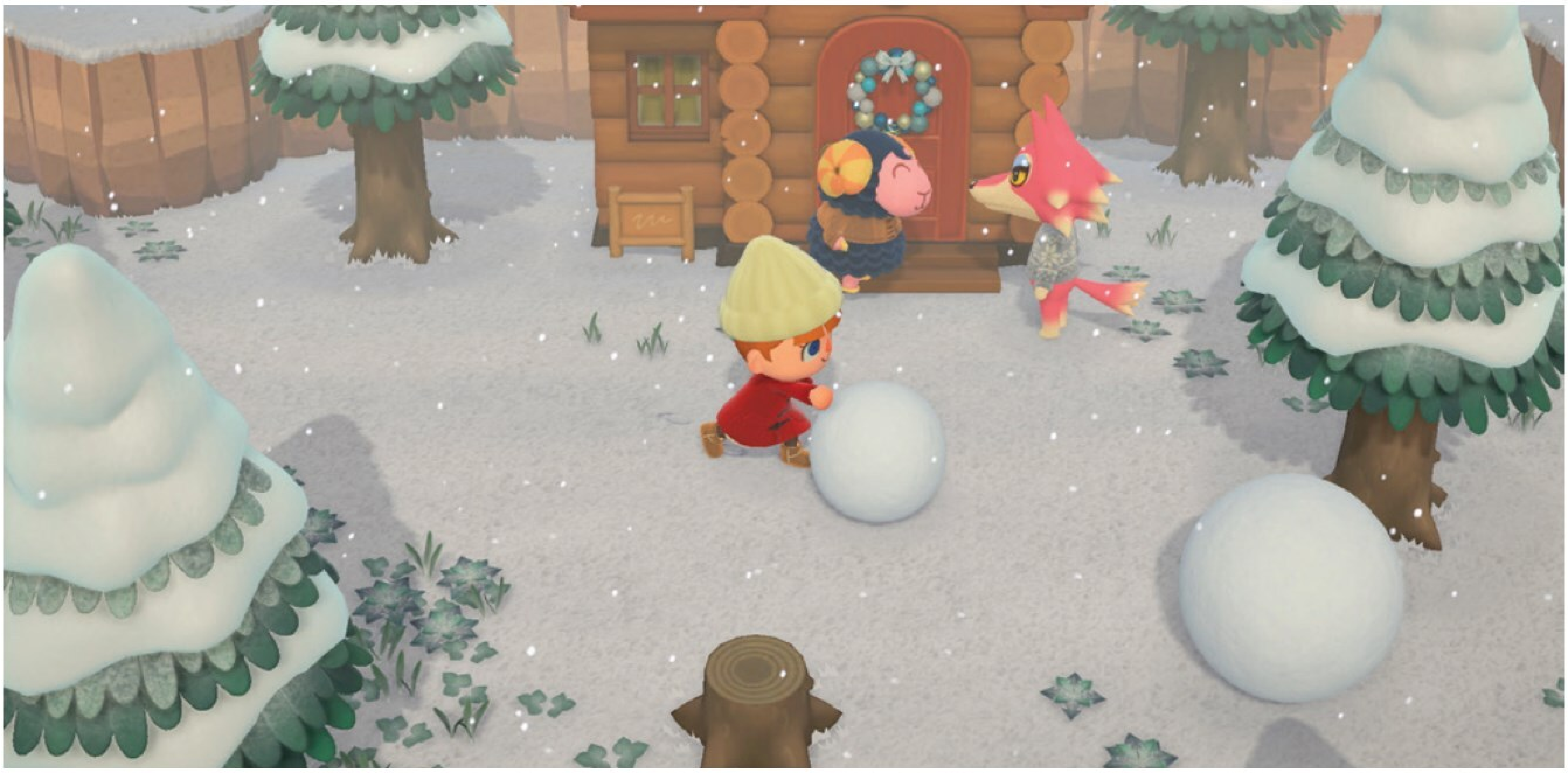


ANIMAL CROSSING: NEW HORIZONS

16

Castaway with your neighbors

Platform: *Switch* ***Style:*** *1-Player Simulation (8-Player Online)* ***Publisher:*** *Nintendo*
Developer: *Nintendo EPD* ***Release:*** *March 20*



Animal Crossing is one of the Switch's most-anticipated titles, but until recently, we knew very little about it. During E3, Nintendo lifted the curtain and revealed new details, while also revealing it's coming later than expected, slipping out of 2019 and into March 2020.

In New Horizons, players do not visit an established town with animal citizens to build their new lives. Instead, you land on a deserted island and build your home, town, and everything else in this new world from scratch. Director Aya Kyogoku says they chose this new setting for two reasons: Nintendo wanted to give players a brand-new experience within Animal Crossing and also grant players full control over how the world grows and expands.

Despite living on a deserted island, Tom Nook is still in control. You come to the island as part of Nook Inc.'s Island Getaway package. You start with a tent, which you can pitch wherever you want. Unlike past Animal Crossings, the whole island is considered your home, which means you can place furniture anywhere you want on the island and not just within your home. Kyogoku noted you can move things in half-units to give you more control over placement.

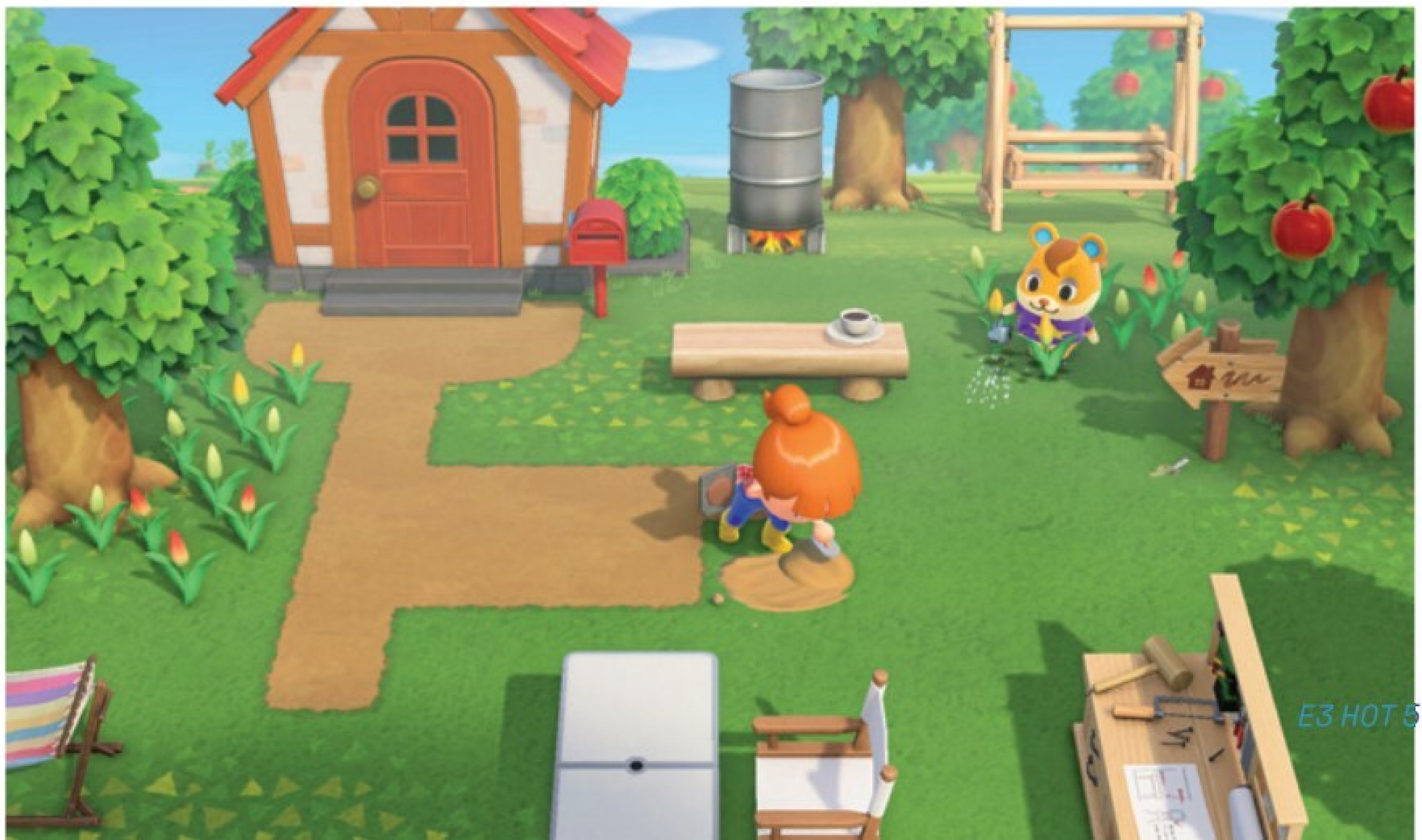
Recipes play a major role, as you can collect items and convert them into other objects. Kyogoku collects branches to make an axe in order to cut down trees to acquire wood to build a bench, which she crafts using a workbench in Tom Nook's house. Nook's son Timmy is also on hand to trade bells for the various materials you don't need, or sell you items if you're not interested in crafting them.

Along with the general collecting and life simulation Animal Crossing is known for, you can also collect miles on your NookPhone to trade for various items and tasks. Producer Hisashi Nogami equated them to frequent flyer miles. They essentially act like in-game achievements and give you some incentive to complete various tasks in the world. The NookPhone also features a photo app that lets you zoom in for a shot and apply different filters.

New Horizons offers the option to play locally with up to four players and up to eight online. In co-op, players can explore and work together to complete tasks. In Kyogoku and Nogami's demo, we watch them work together to collect enough wood to build a bonfire before they run out of time and the day ends.

Other updates include the option for the seasons to reflect those of the southern hemisphere for the first time, the ability to dig up clams on the beach to use for fishing bait, and expanded options for customizing your villagers' appearances. Nintendo also redid all the sound effects using Foley techniques.

Animal Crossing's delay into 2020 is disappointing, but Nintendo of America president Doug Bowser said the decision was made to afford its developers a reasonable work-life balance. Considering the long-term play Animal Crossing is known for, having to wait a few extra months shouldn't be too hard.
» *Kyle Hilliard*



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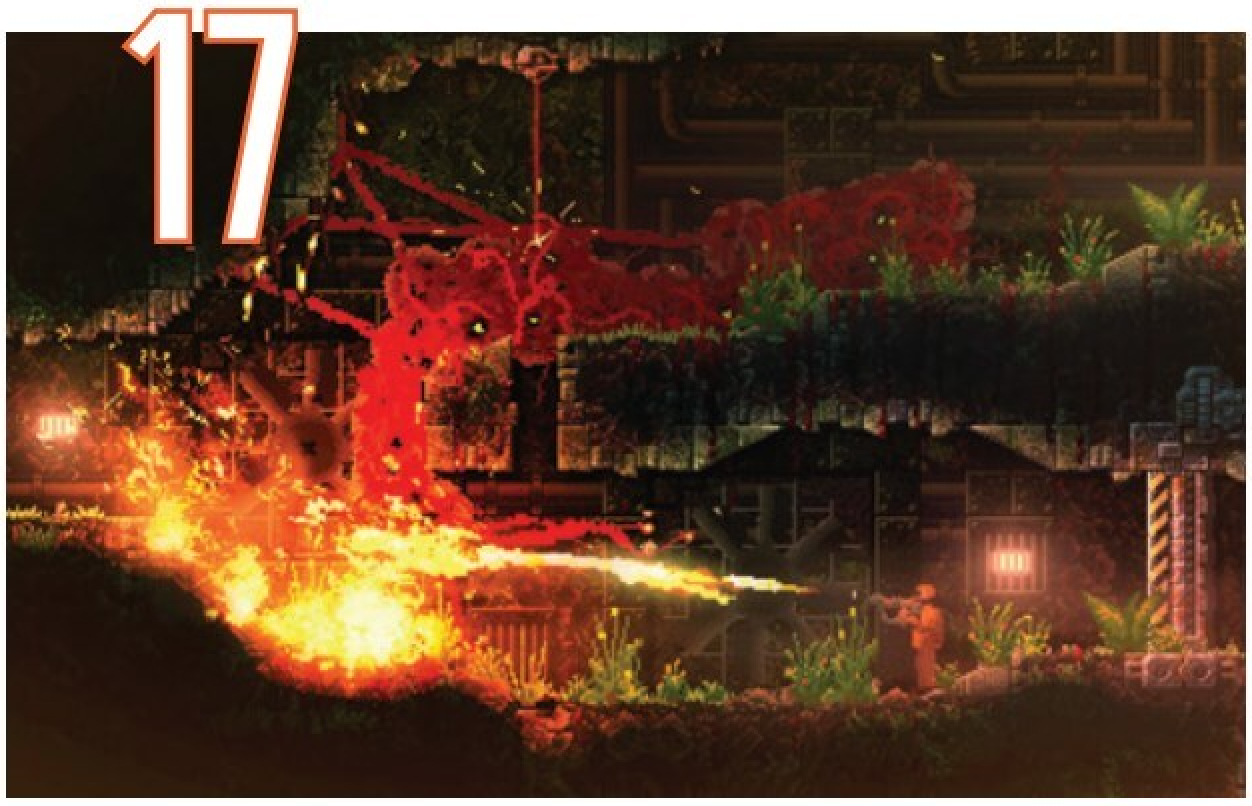
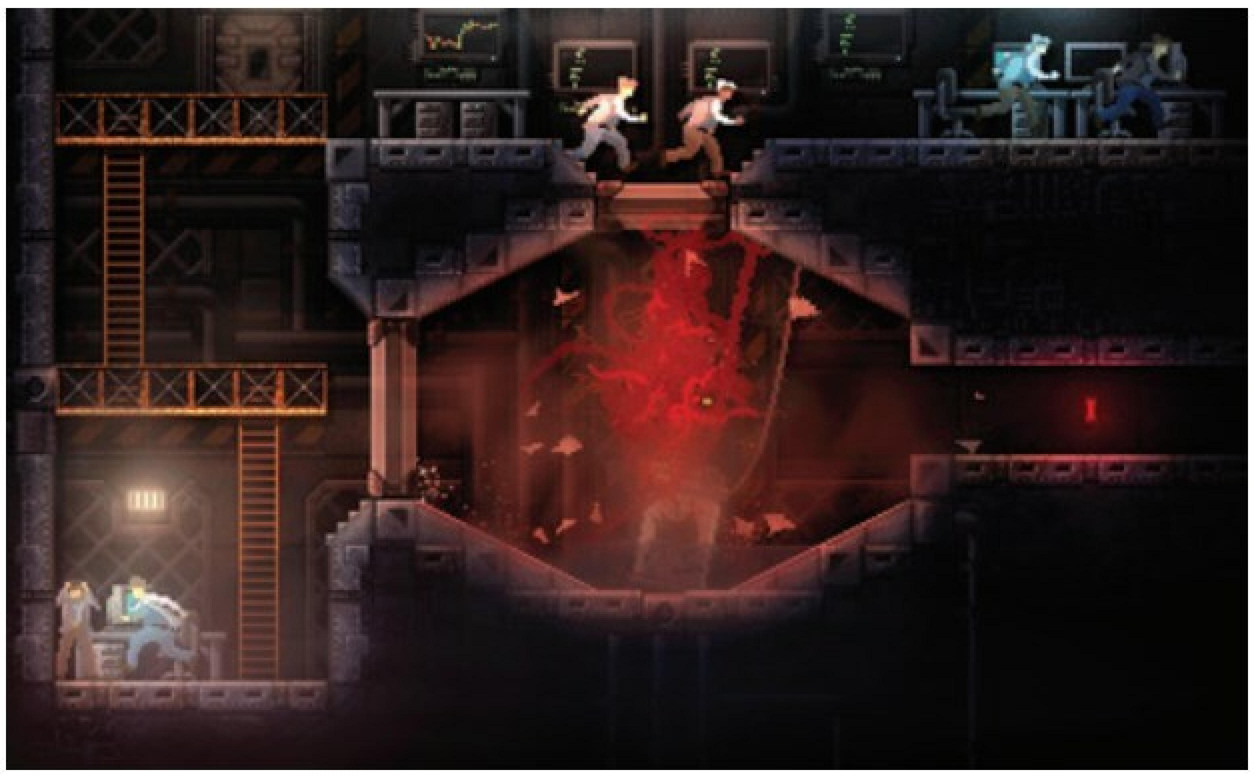


CARRION

The sweet comfort of evil

Platform: *PC (Consoles TBA)* ***Style:*** *1-Player Action*
Publisher: *Devolver Digital* ***Developer:*** *Phobia Game Studio*
Release: *2020*

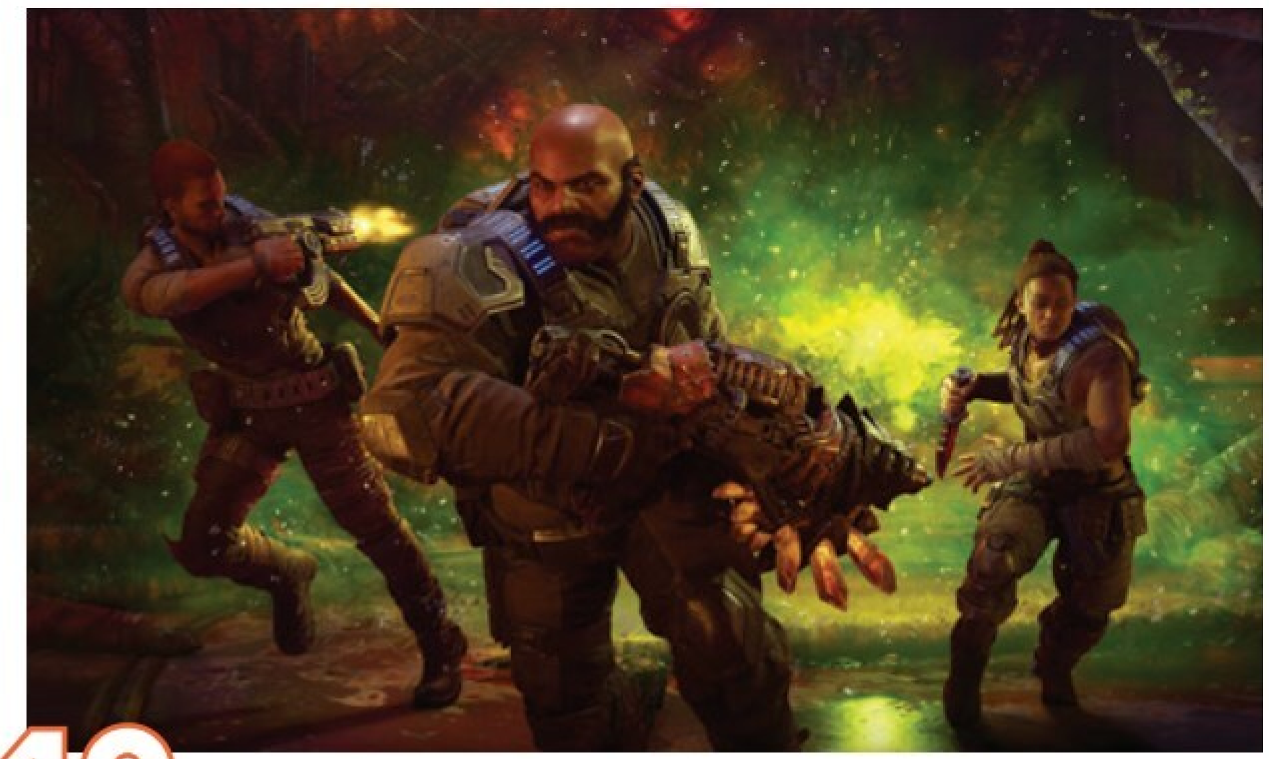


In the movie *The Thing*, a small group of scientists in an arctic research station do everything they can to stop an alien invasion from unfolding. Phobia Studios' Carrion looks to be heavily inspired by this film, and while it hits a lot of the same notes of scientists, a facility, and an amorphous alien that feeds on people, players won't be trying to stop an invasion. In fact, the goal is to help the alien escape…and eat as many scientists and soldiers as possible.

Developer Phobia Studio calls Carrion a "reverse horror experience," meaning the player assumes the role of the alien, and the humans are the bad guys. You have no idea what you are exactly, but after breaking free from a case you were imprisoned in, your goal is to leave. Numerous paths reveal themselves along the way, but many are closed off until you gain more power and size.

The alien doesn't carry guns or gadgets, and is instead a bloody blob with deadly tentacles. This unsightly beast rolls along levels and uses tentacles to latch onto walls and platforms to reach higher elevations quickly. The alien can latch onto a wall with a tentacle (by pressing RT) and bring it down with a swift pull. Many of the workers in the facility fear you and can be eaten with little effort; you can fling these guys around and watch as they gruesomely fall apart into piles of limbs and red pixelated blood slapstick style. However, some carry guns or wear armor, and you have to get creative to take them down. Perhaps dropping a steel case on one of them will do the trick. As the alien rolls through the facility, it can interact with glowing materials in the wall, which allows the beast to rest and turn the surrounding area into a hellish tentacled habitat.

Carrion doesn't have a release date yet, and publisher Devolver says it's coming to PC and consoles (though exact ones weren't given). ***» Andrew Reiner***



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GEARS 5

Going on the offensive

Platform: *Xbox One • PC* ***Style:*** *1 or 2-Player Shooter (Online TBA)* ***Publisher:*** *Xbox Game Studios*
Developer: *The Coalition* ***Release:*** *September 10*

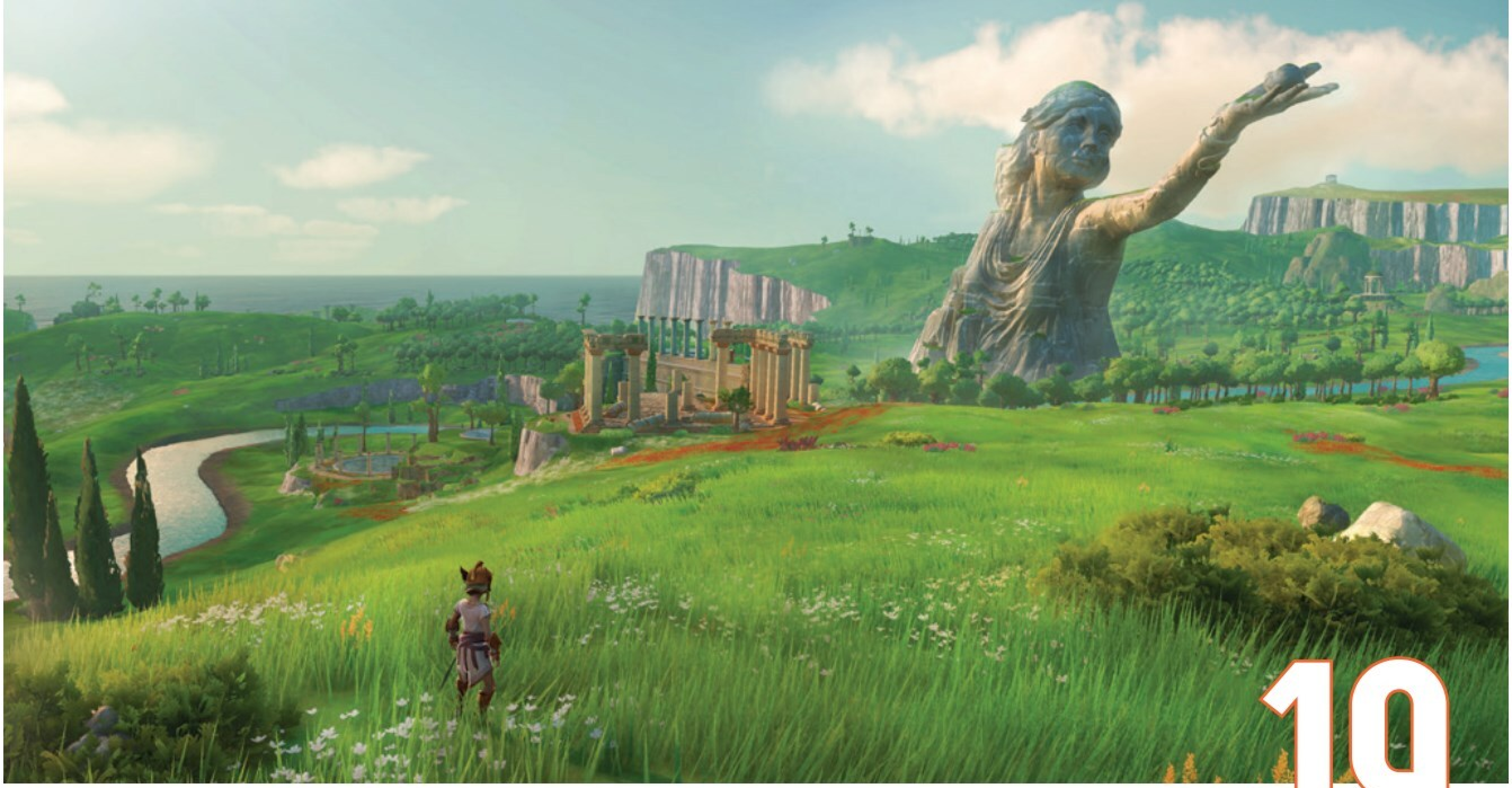
Despite its aggressive themes, visuals, and weapons, the Gears of War franchise has been defined by its defense. The cover-based style of gameplay makes you methodically navigate battlegrounds, and the pioneering Horde mode brings the enemies to you while you and your squadmates dig in and weather the storm. While many of those elements are present in Gears 5 through the campaign, Horde, and competitive multiplayer modes, The Coalition hopes to bring something unique with a new three-player co-op experience called Escape.

In Escape, you work together as new characters to flee an enemy hive before a toxic bomb (which you set) floods it. Lahni is an assault character, Keegan is support, and Mac is a tank. Every character has their own ultimate ability; Lahni's knife becomes electrified, Keegan drops an ammo-replenishment field, and Mac raises a shield other players can duck behind.

You're forced to constantly move forward to get out in time. Ammo is precious, so you want to make a habit out of looting the bodies you leave in your path to the exit. You also stumble upon the occasional safe room, which can give you more ammo. The room also serves as a checkpoint if your team dies – and you'll likely need it as things get chaotic near the exit.

You can also create your own hive using creation tools that allow you to place your own tiles to build and share a deadly labyrinth of your own. In addition to community hives, The Coalition vows to support this mode with a steady stream of its own in-house content.

Gears of War 4 proved The Coalition knows how to make a Gears of War game, and the studio hopes Gears 5 showcases how creative it can get with the formula. We'll have to wait and see just how far the team takes it. ***» Brian Shea***



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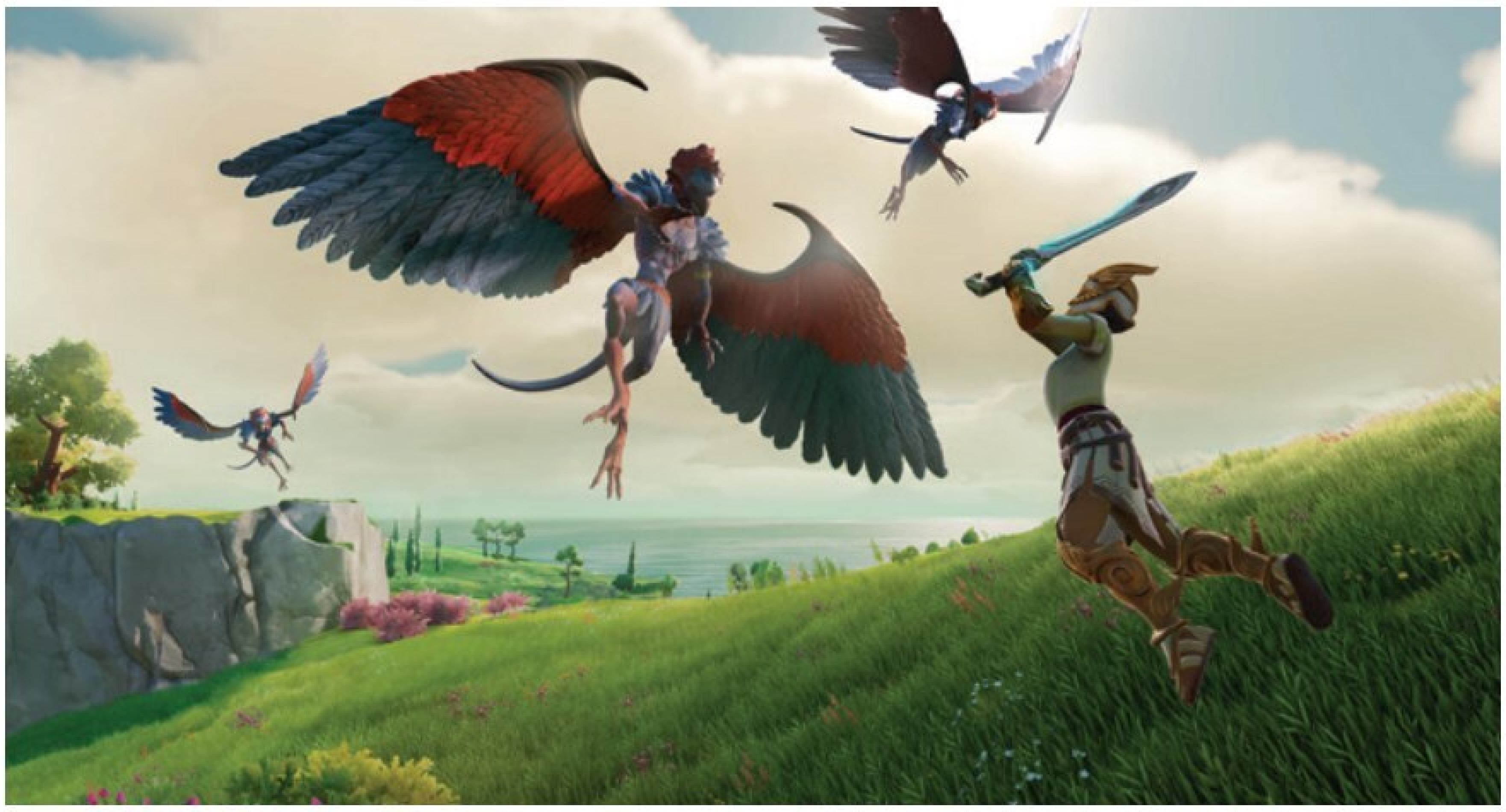
GODS & MONSTERS

A fascinating hybrid

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • Stadia • PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Action* ***Publisher:*** *Ubisoft*
Developer: *Ubisoft Quebec* ***Release:*** *February 25*

Ubisoft surprised audiences during its E3 presentation by unveiling a new IP, and even the early glimpse was enticing. Crafted chiefly by the team behind Assassin's Creed Odyssey at Ubisoft Quebec, Gods & Monsters runs on the same engine as Odyssey, but renders its world in a new way. While it shares the Ancient Greece setting, it implements fantastical mythological layers in a more central way. Gods & Monsters embraces open-world exploration just like the team's prior work, but the playful tone and colorful aesthetic are clearly targeted to a broader (including younger) audience.

Gods & Monsters also invites comparisons to another well-known project: The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. When asked, members of the team acknowledge their love of that game, but also believes they're offering new twists on the formula. For its part, Gods & Monsters features freeform exploration interspersed with puzzles. A stamina meter constrains movement and combat capabilities. On the edges of cliffs, the main character leaps off and gently floats down using a glide mechanic. Distant mountains can be climbed, but you must carefully plan your route through a mix of jumping traversal and climbing. And a painterly art style brings bright green meadows and deep blue skies to life, framing a diminutive but brave hero. It all strikes some familiar chords – but not unwelcome ones – and it's hard to argue with the potential melding of game styles between Assassin's Creed and Zelda.



Gods & Monsters is structured as a frame story. The Ancient World's famous poet, Homer, is relaying an untold myth to his grandchildren, and his magical lyre is bringing the words of the tale to life. In this forgotten legend, players take control of their own created version of a hero named Fenyx, who can be either male or female, as they set out across a world filled with the monsters of Ancient Greece. They must eventually defeat Typhon and his monsters, aided by god-gifted abilities that help to control combat and navigate the world.

In the brief demo I saw (which was running Stadia on a mobile phone), Ubisoft showed off some of these abilities. Our version of Fenyx summoned her namesake, a giant flaming bird, and glided down from a cliff. I was told that eventually the game even features mid-air combat. Once down on the ground, she cut down a tree, and then used telekinesis to fling it at distant foes. And while Ubisoft didn't share the details of it, I was told that Fenyx develops through an RPG-like progression system. As Fenyx ran about the open landscape, I was intrigued by distant vistas depicting towering statues and tantalizing mountains and valleys.

Gods & Monsters is drawing on some potent inspirations, but the same game styles it's emulating can be especially challenging to implement well. But even at this early phase, I was excited by what I saw, and the project seems to be moving in a positive direction. **» *Matt Miller***

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MARVEL ULTIMATE ALLIANCE 3: THE BLACK ORDER

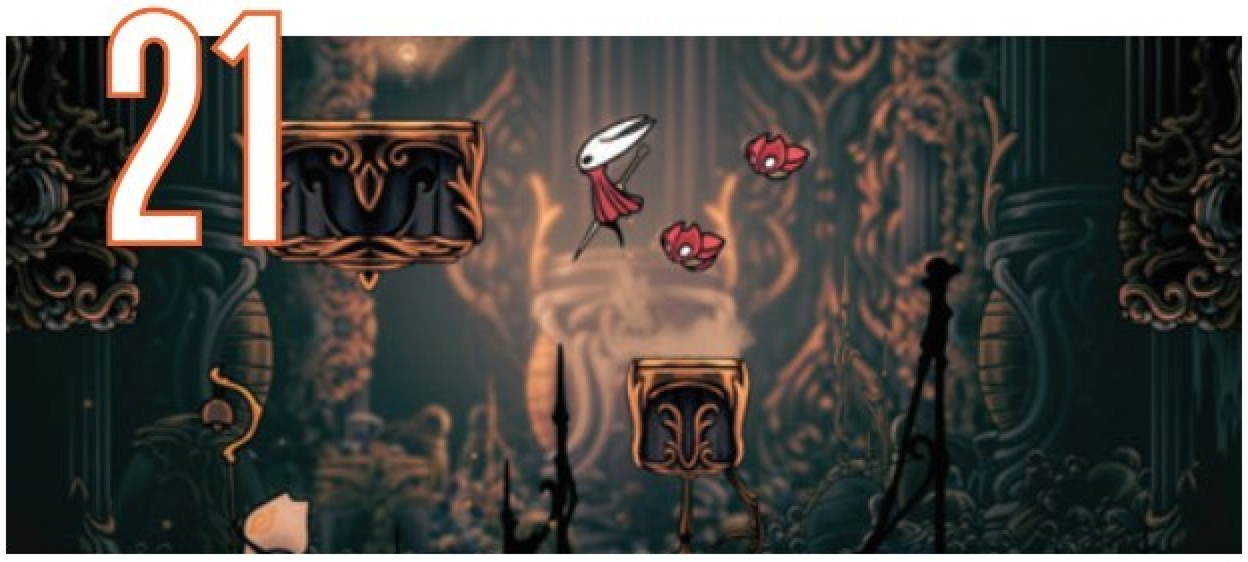
The beginning of a new endgame

Platform: *Switch* ***Style:*** *1 to 4-Player Action/Role-Playing*
Publisher: *Nintendo* ***Developer:*** *Team Ninja*
Release: *July 19*

Marvel Ultimate Alliance has been on a 10-year hiatus, but jumping back into this four-player superhero action/RPG feels like riding a bike. Ultimate Alliance's action remains as frantic and kaleidoscopic as fans remember. As your team of superheroes grows and evolves, they join forces to unleash a barrage of team-up attacks on villains from across the Marvel universe. Your ultimate goal is to hunt down the Infinity Stones and save the galaxy from the snap-happy Thanos.

During an E3 presentation, we watched a group of Sentinels attack the Xavier Institute. Colossus, Cyclops, Nightcrawler, and Psylocke joined the ranks of the Alliance to rebuff this attack, but near the end of the demo one Sentinel got its metallic mitts on an Infinity Stone and grew almost three times its original size. This boss fight was a good showcase for MUA 3's stagger system. While all attacks help whittle down an enemy's health bar, some enemies have a stronger defense. As your team presses their attack, they slowly deplete each enemy's stagger meter. Once this stagger meter is gone, your enemies are momentarily stunned and take extra damage. Carefully managing this stagger system and properly timing heavy attacks are key to nearly every boss battle.

Between battles, Marvel fans won't have any shortage of heroes to choose from. At the show, Nintendo announced that Luke Cage, Elektra, Ghost Rider, and Elsa Bloodstone are part of the base game's roster. Fans looking to add to that already extensive list might be interested in the season pass, which adds more characters from the X-Men, Marvel Knights, and Fantastic Four franchises. That season pass starts rolling out in the fall, but fans will have plenty of marvelous characters to keep them busy over the summer. ***» Ben Reeves***



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HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG

Spinning a new tale

Platform: *Switch • PC • Mac • Linux*
Style: *1-Player Action/Platforming* ***Publisher:*** *Team Cherry*
Developer: *Team Cherry* ***Release:*** *TBA*

Team Cherry had originally planned DLC for Hollow Knight to focus on fan-favorite character Hornet, but the scope of the project soon ballooned into a full-fledged sequel. The hands-on demos available at E3 looked and played like that unmistakable mix of tight platforming and precise combat the original is known for, but the addition of new lands, enemies, and a character who moves and fights in novel ways all add layers of excitement. Hornet's adventure opens with her breaking free from imprisonment, and proceeds as she looks for answers through a Metroid-esque maze of underground passages. For players who enjoyed the first game, Silksong feels like more of what we love, with just enough newness to justify calling it a true successor. ***» Matt Miller***

22

JOHN WICK HEX

A killer strategy

Platform: *PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Strategy*
Publisher: *Good Shepherd Entertainment*
Developer: *Bithell Games* ***Release:*** *TBA*

You know John Wick from adrenaline-fueled theatrical thrill rides, so seeing him star in a strategy game might be surprising. However, we played a few levels of John Wick Hex, and the way it captures the assassin's methodical brutality and improvisational skills make the genre a remarkably good fit.

Players move across a grid, taking out guards with firearms and melee takedowns. Instead of a standard turn-based system, the action operates on a timeline. Everything you (and your enemies) do takes time to wind-up and execute, so you need to keep moving while balancing various options to maximize efficiency.

This approach conveys what makes John Wick cool as a franchise: kinetic fights, unexpected situations, and a tendency for the hero to claim a narrow victory. ***» Joe Juba***

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POKÉMON SWORD & SHIELD

Finally stepping out into the open

Platform: *Switch* ***Style:*** *1-Player Role-Playing (4-Player Online)* ***Publisher:*** *The Pokémon Company, Nintendo*
Developer: *Game Freak* ***Release:*** *November 15*

Pokémon Sword & Shield's initial reveal was underwhelming. Fans hoped the series' transition to a home console would mark a more substantial evolution, but Sword & Shield looked similar to Pokémon's past entries. Game Freak's E3 showing for the game, however, revealed the Wild Area, which turned around our initial skepticism and gives us reason to believe Sword & Shield will offer something new.

Sword & Shield's Wild Area is a large, open space trainers can explore freely. In the Wild Area, you can see pokémon and the player has full control of the camera. The zone spans multiple towns, so you visit it multiple times. You can walk up to pokémon to engage with them and try to capture them, freely explore outside of paths, and it looks like you won't be impeded by gates or the dreaded ledge that trainers of the past could only jump down and never climb up. The weather and time of day affects what type of Pokémon appear in the Wild Area; director Shigeru Ohmori says ice pokémon appear while it's snowing, while water ones appear when it's raining, as examples.

You can whistle while exploring the Wild Area, and different pokémon react in different ways. Some will come to you while others will run away. The bike, a traversal staple in the series, is usable in the Wild Area, and it's more versatile than ever. Along with being able to ride around on the ground, you can also ride across the various lakes. The wheels are able to float when riding over water, and you can activate a helpful dash with the press of a button.

The Wild Area has NPC trainers, but you can also see and interact with other real players there. You can connect with other players online or locally with multiple Switches, and they can walk up to you to make battle and trade requests. Playing together with others also lets you tackle dynamax battles as a team of up to four trainers.

Dynamax pokémon are incredibly powerful and gigantic variations on the base forms. You dynamax your own Pokémon during trainer battles, but when working with others for dynamax battles (which function a lot like Pokémon Go raids) only one person on your team can dynamax their pokémon, so you must coordinate. If you win, everyone gets a shot at catching the defeated pokémon, but even if they run away, producer Junichi Masuda says there are rewards for participating.

The Wild Area and the new mechanics are exciting, but during E3 Masuda did break some disappointing news. Players won't be able to acquire the full Pokémon roster (which now accounts for more than 800 creatures) in Sword & Shield. Pokémon Bank is compatible with the game, but you can only bring forward Pokémon that appear in Sword & Shield's Galar region. It's a shortcoming that longtime, invested Pokémon fans are understandably disappointed by, but new or even recent fans may not even notice.

We've always enjoyed Pokémon, but Sword & Shield's Wild Area is a major step toward the open-world Pokémon game we've dreamed of since playing Red & Blue. **» *Kyle Hilliard***

24

PLANET ZOO

Bring all your favorite animals home

Platform: *PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Simulation* ***Publisher:*** *Frontier Developments* ***Developer:*** *Frontier Developments* ***Release:*** *November 5*

After effectively modernizing the theme-park sim with Planet Coaster, Frontier set its sights on another largely dormant subgenre: zoo simulation. Planet Zoo takes what the team learned with its previous game and builds upon it in substantial ways, showcasing incredible detail and deep customization options.

Planet Zoo is about more than giving your paying customers a great view; Frontier wants a major emphasis on education and conservation. This means in addition to catering to your guests' needs through interesting displays, themed restaurants, and plentiful bathrooms, you need to make sure the animals are happy and well-cared for.

To ensure your animals' happiness and health, you can access menus that lay out every single creature's needs. Within the menu, you get insights into their level of happiness across four categories: nutrition, social, enrichment, and habitat. Each category gives you a lead on problems before they arise. If their habitat isn't up to par, maybe they need more space, or you might need to replace the soil with some grassy areas. You can also up the enrichment of any animal by giving them toys, puzzles, scratching posts, or other items in their habitats.

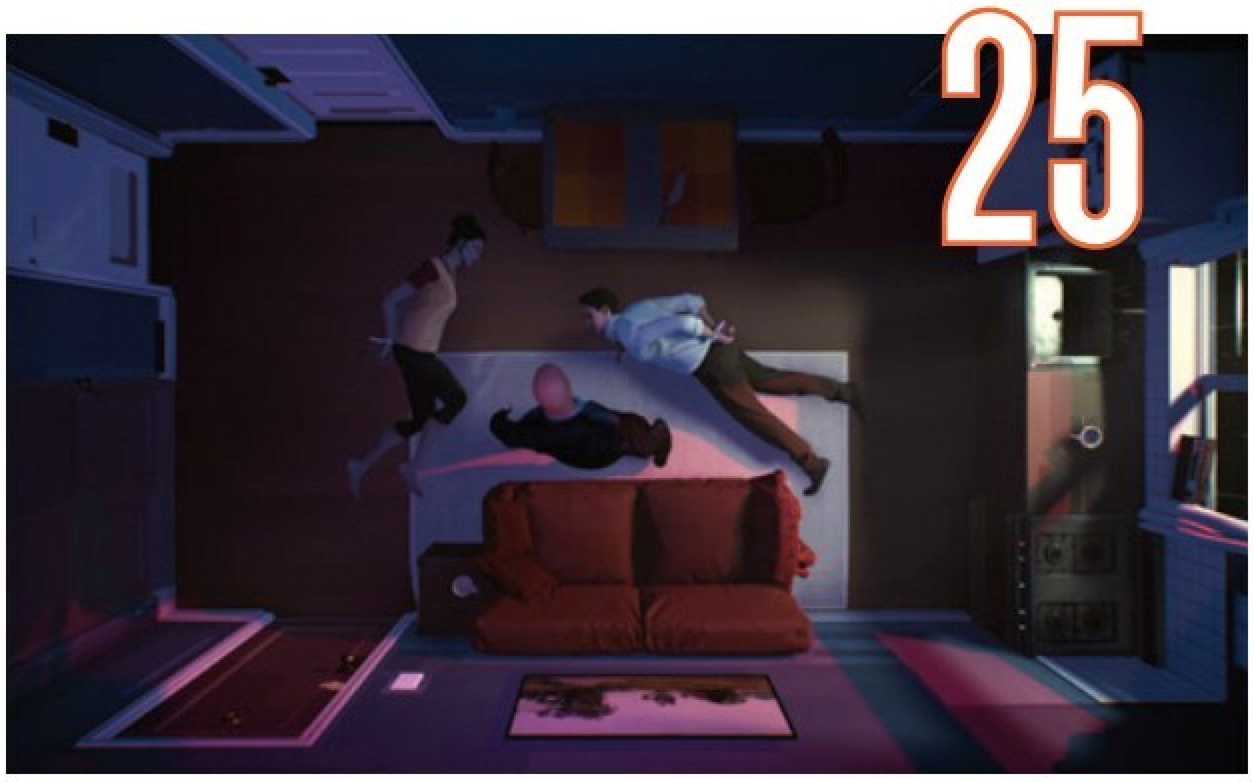
You want to put plenty of thought into how these habitats are designed, not only for how it affects the animals and guests, but also because it looks so good. The customization options are impressive; you can design every habitat exactly how you like it, down to custom-designed climbing frames for the chimpanzees. Every animal is intricately detailed, all the way to single strands of hair on lions, tigers, and giraffes, while reptiles like crocodiles have detailed scale designs. In addition, elements like patterns on zebras and giraffes are hereditary, meaning that when animals breed, they pass certain traits to the resulting offspring. Because of this, no two animals are ever alike.

Animals behave dynamically, meaning when a rainstorm suddenly occurs during my E3 demo, some chimps sought shelter from the weather, while others delighted in splashing around in the mud. This also affects how animals breed, use the items in their habitat, and various other elements of their lives.

To ensure the creatures in your zoo are cared for, you must hire employees. Right now, Frontier is only talking about zookeepers, but there will be other types in the final game. Zookeepers base their operations out of keeper huts, which you want to hide near animal residences out of sight from the customers. Watching animals react to the keepers is great; when the keeper opened the gate to a habitat of dogs with a bucket of food, the dogs' ears perked up and they excitedly stood up. Small details like that effectively demonstrate why I was so impressed by the demo.

Planet Zoo hopes to give simulation fans the ultimate zoo-management fantasy when it launches this November. If the demo I saw was any indication, it's poised to elevate past anything the genre has ever seen before.

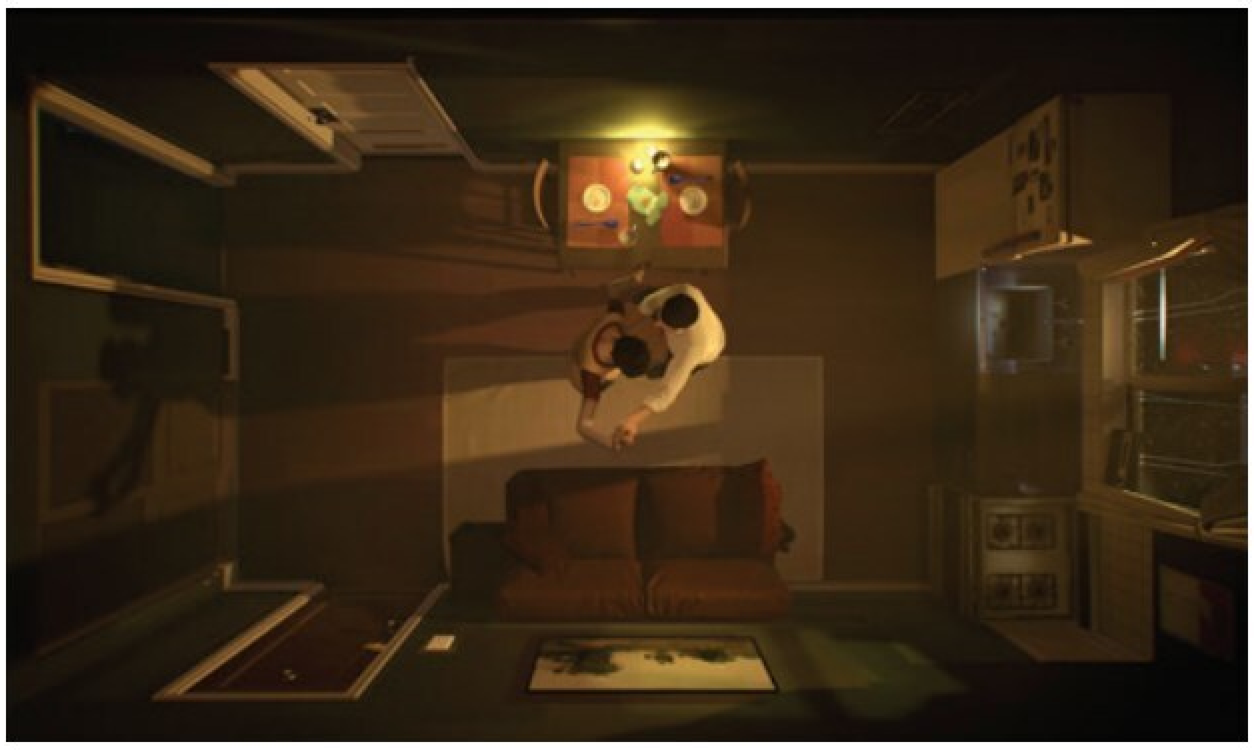
» Brian Shea



12 MINUTES

Gradually surviving

Platform: *Xbox One • PC* **Style:** *1-Player Adventure*
Publisher: *Annapurna Interactive* **Developer:** *Luis Antonio*
Release: *2020*

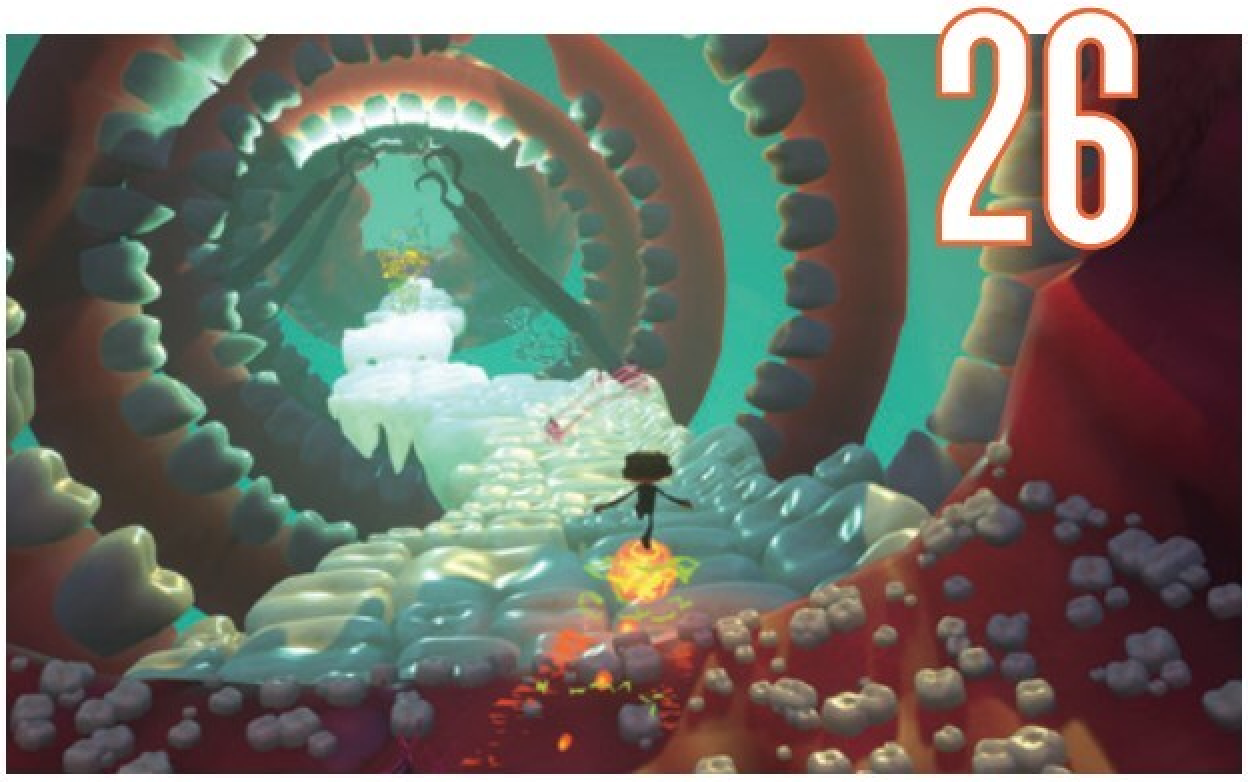


A husband and his wife sit down for dinner. She tells him she's pregnant, but before they can fully celebrate, a man claiming to be a cop pounds on their apartment door. The cop barges in and starts interrogating the woman about the death of her father, and when the husband tries to intervene, the cop chokes him out. Then, it starts all over again from the beginning.

Developer Luis Antonio's 12 Minutes puts an intimate spin on the time-loop concept. It takes place in a small apartment with just a few characters, casting players as the husband who is forced to repeat the same 12-minute loop that passes in real time. However, he can leverage everything he's learned during previous loops to survive longer and get to the bottom of the mystery that brings the cop to their door in the first place.

How can you delay the police officer's entry? How can you convince your wife you aren't hallucinating? You try to answer these questions by speaking to other characters and poking around the apartment. During the loop I played, I crushed up some sleeping pills and slipped them into my wife's drink. I wasn't proud of myself, but it got her to the relative safety of the bedroom while I looked around the apartment for a way to fight back against the alleged cop I knew would appear. I also dialed 911 on a phone I found in the closet, but I never learned if the real police ever show up; the front door I locked and the knife I found weren't enough to stop the man when he came knocking.

The narrative unfolds gradually, and the knowledge the husband gains is cumulative, so each attempt leads to new options and different experiments. Even though the loops take a maximum of 12 minutes (mine was much shorter), that small space of time contains a complex web of secrets, and the process of unraveling it seems unique and intriguing. **» *Joe Juba***



PSYCHONAUTS 2

The mind-bending adventure returns

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC*
Style: *1-Player Action/Platforming* **Publisher:** *Xbox Game Studios*
Developer: *Double Fine* **Release:** *2020*

It's been only few days since Raz graduated from summer camp to becoming a full-fledged psychonaut, but already so much has changed. This psychic acrobat has grown in a multitude of ways, and now works for the Psychonauts' Motherlode HQ as an intern and must help the team reveal a mole.

At E3, we were treated to a hands-off demo that begins with Raz sitting in a mundane cubicle, then attending a meeting with a handful of returning characters like love interest Lily and Coach Oleander. Something seems off from the onset: Dr. Loboto, the villain of the original game, is receiving an award for employee of the month. How is that possible? As the demo continues, it becomes clear this isn't the real world at all: we're inside Loboto's brain and the Psychonauts are trying to fool him into telling them his plans.

In expected Psychonauts fashion, things get wacky from here. The camera above cubicles shifts perspective so Raz is jumping atop ceilings and walls, hallways stretch at a moment's notice as if they were rubber bands, and floors transform into slides so Raz glides downward. Everything in the world feels mind-bendingly malleable.

As Dr. Loboto realizes something is wrong, we move from the façade of an office environment to seeing what his true mind looks like underneath. Wallpapers are ripped away and new enemies appear, such as chattering teeth. Photo frames are replaced by a mouth's gums and Raz jumps onto damp tongues (since Loboto is a crazed dentist). It's all very imaginative and delightfully weird.

The demo concludes with Loboto attempting to convince his mysterious boss that he wouldn't betray them. It's unclear how this all ties into the overarching plot, but it sure is curious. Psychonauts 2 looks as whimsical (if not more) than its predecessor, and we hope it plays as well as it looks when it releases next year. **» *Elise Favis***

Loose Lips
DON'T SNITCH

27

MADDEN NFL 20

Working on a new playbook

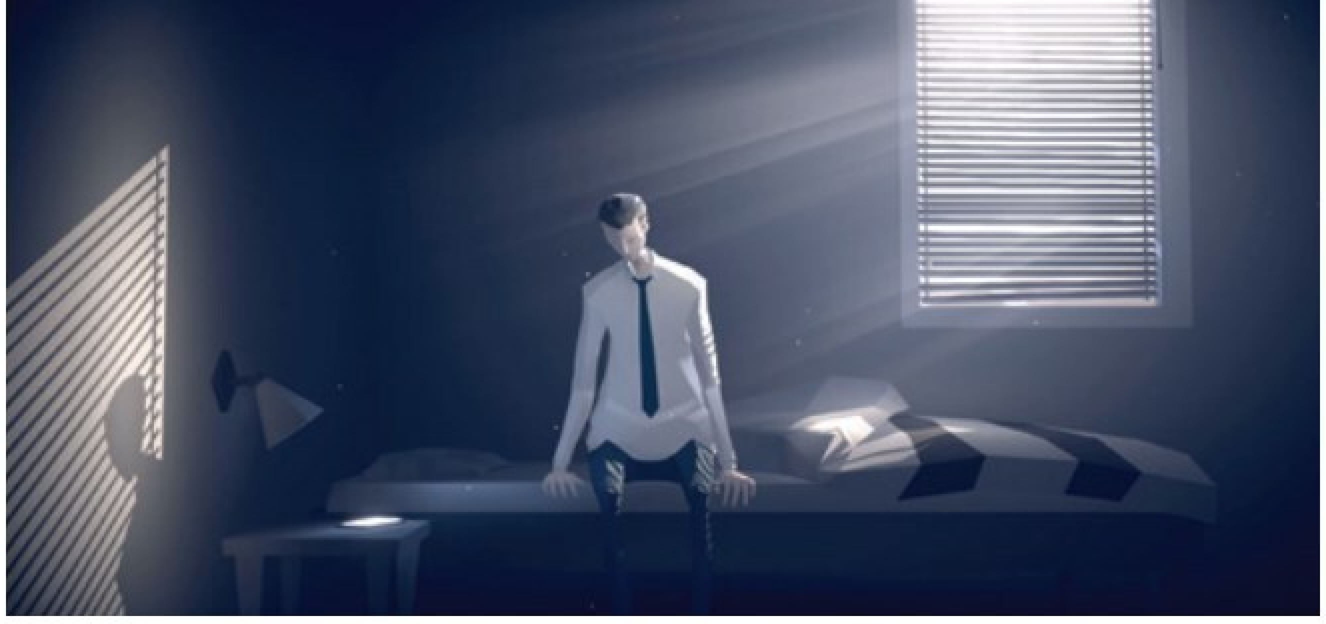
Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Style:** 1 to 4-Player Sports (6-Player Online) **Publisher:** EA Sports
Developer: EA Tiburon **Release:** August 2

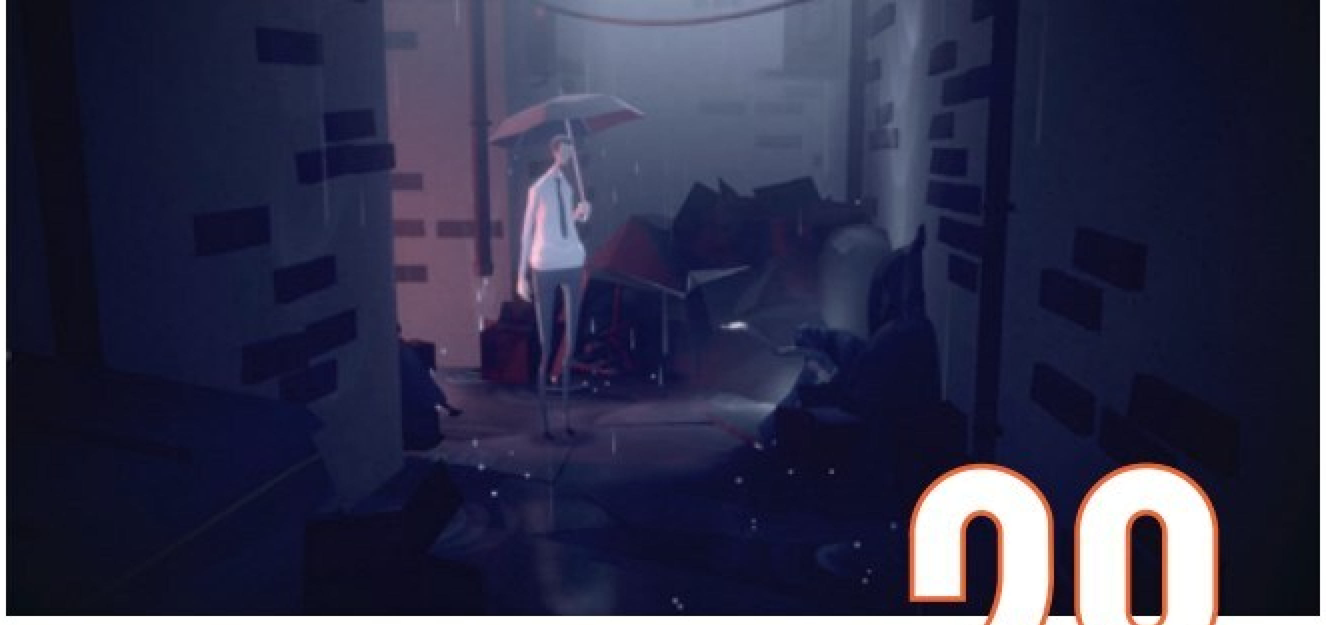
E3 traditionally serves as the public's first chance to play the new Madden, and in recent years developer EA Tiburon has followed up the game's appearance at the convention with a closed beta. These airings have created more scrutiny for the title's gameplay, which is a good thing given the lack of polish in Madden 19. I played Madden 20 and am happy to report the title already plays better than the current game. Players' movements feel weighty and solid but not plodding, perhaps due to Madden 20 being the second year with the internal studios' RPM motion system and better animation segues for cuts, catches, and tackles.

This baseline gameplay not only addresses some previous complaints, but it's the foundation for the new Superstar X-Factor abilities. It's still early, but balancing all the various abilities among the top players that have them (each team has a few or a handful of them) is going to be a mixed bag of the subtle, excitingly dangerous, and overpowered. Frankly, I don't expect EA Tiburon to balance them all out 100-percent correct on its first try, but I hope at a minimum it doesn't make one-on-one aggressive catches (which are already a problem) too powerful. On the other hand, some abilities, like a WR having more hot routes or Russell Wilson being able to highlight extra blitzers when the ball is snapped, are helpful without breaking the game. Furthermore, the X-Factors, which only a select few players have, might only kick in once or twice a game due to the requirements to turn them on.

Madden 20 adds more variables to the balance equation with the addition of run/pass options and simplified controls for QBs to run and maneuver in the pocket. Run/pass option plays require the player to pre-read the defense before the ball is snapped in order to make a quick decision to handoff the ball or pass it as soon as you hike the ball. It's a great way to strike at a defense's weakness, and if you miss the read the play seamlessly reverts to the predetermined default run or pass.

Madden 20 has a lot on its plate, but as strange as it sounds, I don't think it needs to be absolutely balanced. Yes, there needs to be ways to counter or neutralize skills, and no situation or play should be automatically money, but there is no such thing as true balance in the NFL. It's all about leveraging your skills, maximizing situations, and winning one-on-one matchups. We're already seeing that in these pre-release builds, where defensive ends – once invisible in the game – need to be accounted for. Football is often described as a chess game, but not all the pieces on the board are just pawns. ***» Matthew Kato***





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MOSAIC

Encouraging the path less traveled

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC • Mac • Linux* ***Style:*** *1-Player Adventure* ***Publisher:*** *Krillbite Studio*
Developer: *Krillbite Studio* ***Release:*** *Summer*

The team behind Among the Sleep is trying something decidedly different with its second project, a third-person narrative mystery that captured our attention with its evocative art and resonant themes.

Players control a lonely worker and commuter as he wakes to another day of drudgery in a job he desperately wants to avoid. His phone regularly alerts him with meaningless notifications that must be silenced. The flow of people, communication, traffic, and activity always encourage him to continue his life of tedium. But on this day, if the player diverts him toward fleeting moments of life, light, and companionship, surreal events begin to unfold – quiet (and often moving) moments of peace and joy.

In the E3 demo, variations of that idea arise repeatedly. A cat stuck in a tree leaps down into my arms with encouragement, which in turn leads to a moment of sunlight through the gray. In another example, the man's walk to work is interrupted by the sight of a moth across the street. Control switches to the winged creature as it moves, oblivious, through a construction site in which every fluttering movement brings it inches from destruction, even as the man watches entranced from across the road.

Mosaic plays with concepts of loneliness and resignation, and with its simple vignettes, challenges ideas about the priorities of our daily lives. The art style depicts figures stretched thin and lifeless by their world, while gray color tones are oppressive, relieved only by the occasional warmer light that signifies a possible moment for interaction. After playing for a few minutes, I was wholly sold on Mosaic's unusual premise, and I can't wait to see what else the game has to communicate in its critique of modern life. ***» Matt Miller***

JOURNEY TO THE SAVAGE PLANET

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A vibrant, space-faring adventure

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Adventure* ***Publisher:*** *505 Games*
Developer: *Typhoon Studios* ***Release:*** *July 5*

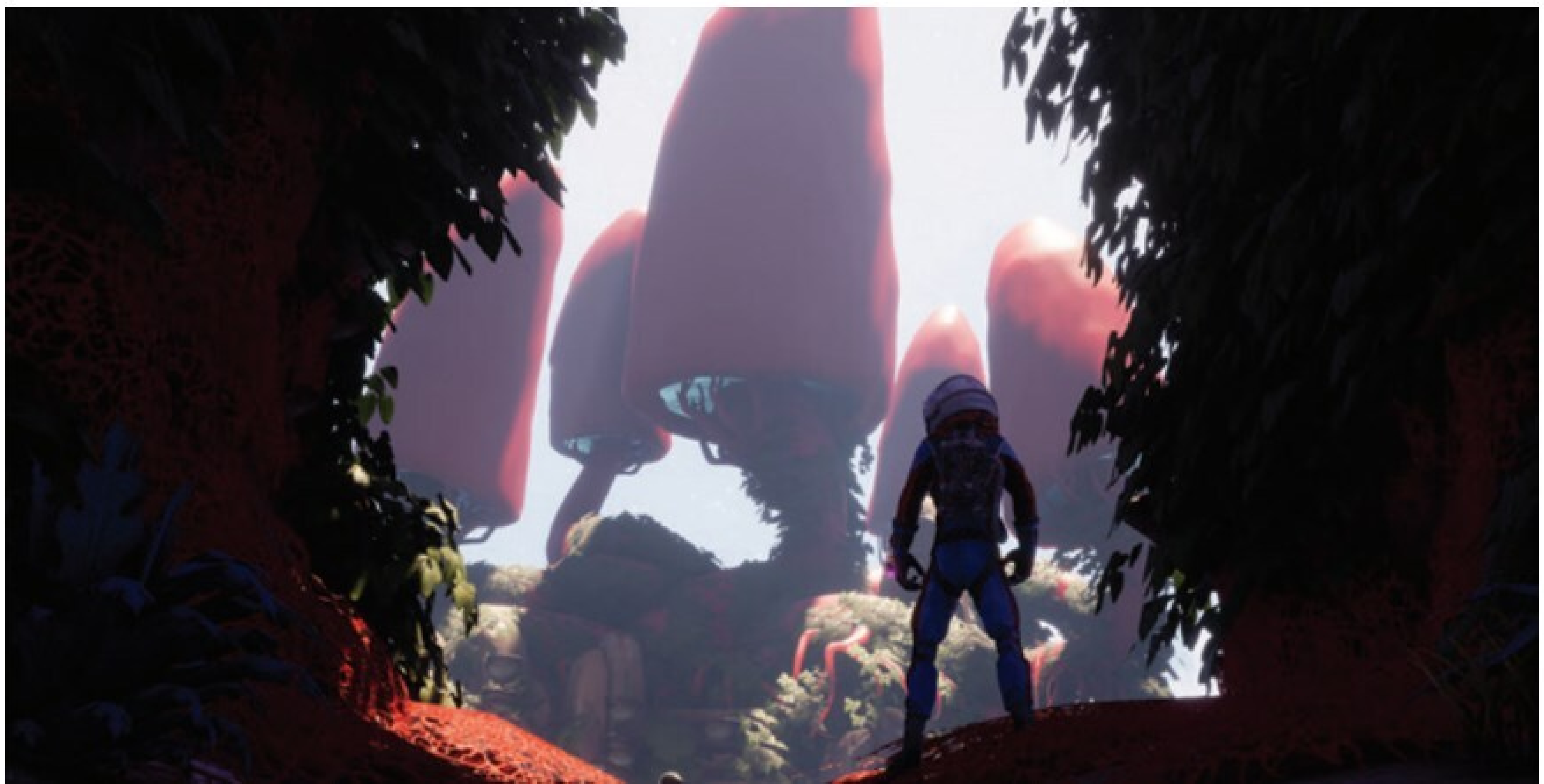
Journey to the Savage Planet puts you in the shoes of a space explorer for Kindred Aerospace, a company that sends employees out to distant, terraformable planets to see if human habitation is possible. It looks to be a lighthearted and charming adventure that lets you chart your own path through vibrant alien worlds. We got our first hands-on with the game at E3.

My journey began on a ship, which is your respawn point each time you die. Here, you can watch a few bizarre infomercials meant for a space-faring audience (such as an unsettling advert about a "cuddly" companion made entirely of meat), then set off to venture farther than before. The planet I explored had surprisingly diverse biomes; parts of the terrain were blanketed in snow, while other areas had flowing riverbeds and lush clifftops.

Docile and aggressive aliens roam the planet, including goblin-looking purple creatures and flying bugs. Not all of them attack you, and I found it amusing that if I shot at nonviolent beings, they let out high-pitched wails of terror then ran away.

During the demo, I am armed with a gun and a free hand to equip things like Grob, a food substitute that looks like unappetizing goo. It can heal you, or you can use it to lure enemies. When I throw a can of Grob into a plant monster's mouth, it leads one of the small purple creatures to hop in and get torn to shreds by sharp teeth. As the plant beast munches on its new snack, several of its roots and vines curl up to reveal a new exploration path. I enjoyed the non-linearity to the gameplay, particularly how I could choose different ways to go after every death to have a slightly different experience as I journeyed to a waypoint.

With a charming and colorful world to explore and splashes of well-placed humor, Journey to the Savage Planet has a unique tone. I came away from the demo excited to see more. ***» Elise Favis***



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MINECRAFT: DUNGEONS

Bashing without building

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC* ***Style:*** *1 to 4-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online)*
Publisher: *Xbox Game Studios* ***Developer:*** *Mojang* ***Release:*** *Spring*

Anyone who has gone toe-to-toe with an Enderman knows Minecraft isn't just about digging and building bases. Combat can be a rewarding facet of the experience, and that's what Minecraft: Dungeons is all about. It has familiar creatures, items, and biomes from the original game, but applies them to a classic isometric action/RPG framework. Players hack and blast their way through randomly generated maps, gathering loot and gaining levels. You wouldn't be wrong to think of it as "Diablo, but Minecraft," though developer Mojang tweaks the formula to make it more accessible.

While Minecraft: Dungeons has plenty of challenge and variety, Mojang seems to be dialing back on the complexity that can make the genre intimidating to newcomers. Instead of predefined classes with deep ability trees, all of your character's abilities are tied to the gear you have equipped. If you want to summon a wolf companion to fight enemies for you, you don't need to invest in any special skills; just equip the Tasty Bone artifact, and your animal ally appears with the press of a button. Giving yourself a sudden burst of speed is as simple as using the Deathcap Mushroom artifact – no previous spellcasting experience required. These artifacts are reusable (but on cooldown timers), functioning as a suite of special skills you can shuffle depending on how you want to play.

You can also customize how your weapons perform through enchantment – a process that has also been streamlined compared to other action/RPGs. Weapons can have up to three enchantment slots, and for each one of those slots, you can choose one of three possible properties. If you find a new sword with one enchantment slot, you may have the option of investing in enchantments like chain-lightning or poison damage over time. Once you choose one, the other options are closed off, but you can pour multiple enchantment points (which you gain every level) into your selected bonus. You don't need to worry about wasting points on equipment that will become obsolete; when you salvage an enchanted item, you gain back the points you put into it.

In the time I spent playing Minecraft: Dungeons, it was clear Mojang has a firm grasp on the fundamentals of the genre. As I hacked away at skeletons and Endermen in a desert temple, the core combat felt quick, responsive, and familiar. The action also looked great thanks to Minecraft's crisp and colorful style. It may not be a drastic reinvention of the formula, but the basic loop of fighting monsters and getting loot is still entertaining, and Minecraft: Dungeons is building on that in clever ways. ***» Joe Juba***

LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA

Reassembling the galaxy

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC* ***Style:*** *1 or 2-Player Action* ***Publisher:*** *Warner Bros. Interactive*
Developer: *TT Games* ***Release:*** *2020*

TT Games' Lego titles have been incredibly consistent and entertaining for nearly 14 years. They've also been incredibly similar. TT Games changes that formula with Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga. Not only has the developer reworked its game engine, the studio went back to the drawing board and rethought the Lego game experience.

As the name implies, The Skywalker Saga includes content based on all nine films in the main Star War's saga – this excludes films like *Rogue One* and *Solo*, but The Skywalker Saga is still a hearty package. At the beginning of the game, players choose which film they want to tackle first, then they can freely fly around the galaxy, participate in random dogfights, and touch down on a variety of locations within the Star Wars universe, such as Naboo, Coruscant, Bespin, Hoth, Starkiller Base, and Mustafar.

Planets in The Skywalker Saga are open-world hubs that players can explore at their own pace. Each world is full of miniature tasks, hidden treasures, and traditional story missions. Collectible Kyber Bricks function as the game's currency, and unlock a variety of secrets and upgrades. Every vehicle within these hubs can be driven, which is great because many of The Skywalker Saga's environments are large. We watched Luke collect a few Kyber Bricks on Tatooine before hopping into a landspeeder and touring hotspots like Mos Eisley, the Kenobi homestead, and the Sarlacc pit.

Another big change for the series is the camera, which now offers a behind-the-shoulder view. This more intimate perspective gives players a closer look at the action. Combat has also been retooled, allowing for a variety of combo attacks and more precise third-person shooting. Force-users have access to a variety of powers, such as the ability to levitate blocks and toss them around. Like previous Lego games, every hero has their own set of skills suited for specific tasks; while Luke might be well-suited for a brawl, C-3P0 is able to talk to droids and gain insider information.

During E3, a lot of eyes were on Respawn's Star Wars Jedi: Fallen Order, but TT Games' The Skywalker Saga was impressive enough that it didn't feel overshadowed. This Lego game doesn't release until next year, but it looks like a brilliant all-ages celebration of the most beloved sci-fi franchise in history. ***» Ben Reeves***

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AVENGERS

Not the reveal we were expecting

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • Stadia • PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Action (4-Player Online)*
Publisher: *Square Enix* ***Developer:*** *Crystal Dynamics, Eidos Montreal* ***Release:*** *May 15*

Going into this year's E3, Avengers was one of the show's most anticipated titles. People wanted to see if developers Crystal Dynamics and Eidos Montreal could do for this super team what Insomniac Games did for Spider-Man. The reveal, which closed out Square Enix's press conference, didn't deliver the earth-shaking Hulk punch people were hoping for. Instead, social media exploded with criticism. The character designs were targeted the most, with jokes saying Square hired the stunt doubles for the heroes instead.

Another point of contention was Square's decision not to show extended gameplay during the press conference. Viewers mostly saw story sequences and brief snippets of action, which looked good, but no one knew if they were pulled from cinematic sequences or gameplay. On the following day in a closed-door session, Square showed roughly 25 minutes of Avengers in action, which confirmed that the clips we saw were indeed controllable, yet the gameplay managed to leave us with more questions than answers.

The demo begins with the Avengers celebrating the opening of their West Coast headquarters near San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. When a series of explosions erupt on the iconic bridge, the heroes' "A-Day" celebration is cut short. Thor and Iron Man take to the skies and zip over the bridge. Amid overturned cars and debris, armed forces with skull masks take aim at Thor. He retaliates with a slam of his hammer Mjölnir against the asphalt, creating a thunderous shockwave that sends the foes flying.

The bridge's narrow space is used effectively to show off each of the heroes' powers in small combat arenas where 10 to 12 enemies could be engaged at once. All of the action is handled from the third-person perspective and looks reminiscent of Rocksteady's Arkham games, with combos that begin with one enemy often continue on to others. The big difference is a hero like Thor doesn't see the need to counter. He occasionally dodges rocket blasts, but mostly goes right at enemies with wild swings of his hammer. He can spin Mjölnir quickly around his wrist to land a powered-up hit that sends an adversary flying a good 100 feet, or use it as a projectile. If a thrown hammer hits a foe, it carries him in the air until it slams into a wall. Thor keeps that enemy pinned in this location until he retrieves his prized weapon. On its return flight, if enemies are in the way, they'll get hit.

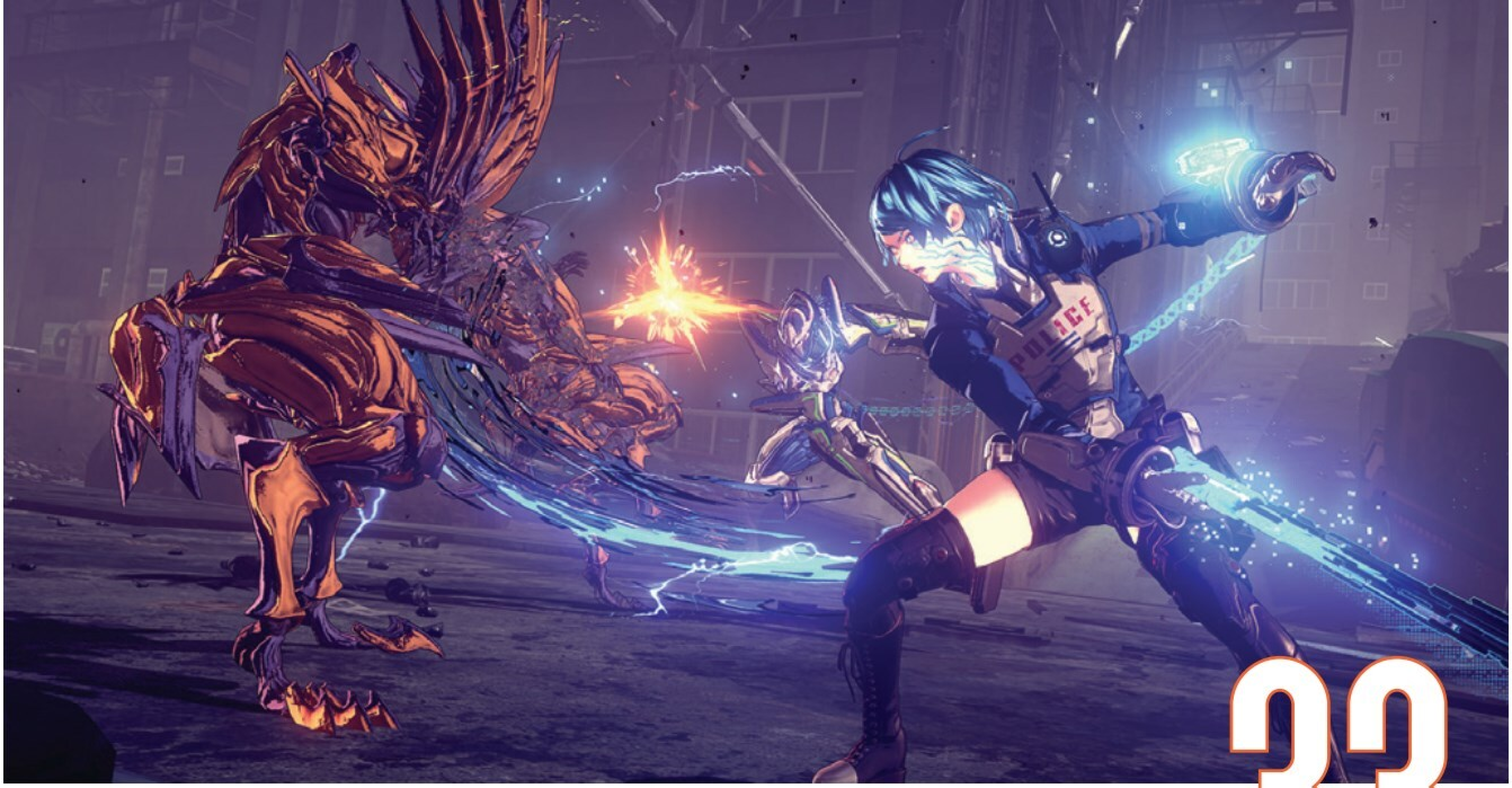
The next character we see is Iron Man. His gameplay begins with a scripted flight sequence along the bridge – a moment that shows us that this gameplay sequence is as linear as can be, and the player just needs to keep making progress to reach the next character switch. Iron Man engages enemies outfitted with jetpacks, and deals with them quickly with precise hand beam blasts. The flight sequence eventually gives way to another combat arena, which is again small and circular in design, just like Thor's. Iron Man begins his battle by hovering and picking away at foes with quick hand beams, but then deals with four to five at once with a powerful blast from his chest-mounted arc reactor.

The next character swap jumps to Hulk, who, as you would expect, is pure aggression. He can grab an enemy and use the hapless soldier as a weapon to swat at other foes. He can also pick up two enemies at once, then slam them together to take both out. As the bridge begins to collapse, Hulk bounces from one small combat zone to the next.The player has a hand in this mobility, and must complete surprising (and short) platforming challenges. In one area Hulk may just need to leap a good 50 feet into the air to reach a distant platform (which he can slam down on to smash every foe on it). In another section, he may be required to wall run, but not like you would expect. While the surface looks like something someone would run along with their feet, Hulk just grabs it, bends the steel a little, then pushes off of it to reach an adjacent wall or surface.

The demo then jumps to Captain America in a small command room aboard the Avengers' Helicarrier. While Cap seems proficient at close quarters, he throws his shield often, and can even keep it airborne, by kicking it back at additional foes. The demo ends with Black Widow squaring off against Taskmaster (who looks slightly different than his recent appearance in Insomniac's Spider-Man). Widow can fire her guns and dive-roll when Taskmaster strikes, but a lot of the big moments in this battle are handled though quick-time sequences. The entire 25-minute presentation was filled with timed button presses.

While we got a good look at how the single-player campaign will unfold, we didn't get a taste of what four-player co-op – the big hook of the game – will be like. The single-player campaign apparently tells its own story, while the co-op missions tell others. As all of these avenues of play are explored, Square plans to add new characters to the playable roster. All heroes are customizable both in skills and appearance. New gear is obtained mid-level via drops and as a reward for finishing missions.

Crystal didn't want to answer many questions, which is a shame, but the game still has plenty of time before its 2020 release. Even with the reveal not going as planned, curiosity surrounding this famed super-hero team remains high. ***» Andrew Reiner***



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ASTRAL CHAIN

A new leash on combat

Platform: *Switch* ***Style:*** *1-Player Action* ***Publisher:*** *Nintendo* ***Developer:*** *Platinum Games* ***Release:*** *August 30*

Building on the stylish-action core developer Platinum Games has cultivated for years, Astral Chain has the quick combos and dodge moves you've come to expect from the studio's output, but also adds several interesting layers that could make it Platinum's most intricate character-action game yet.

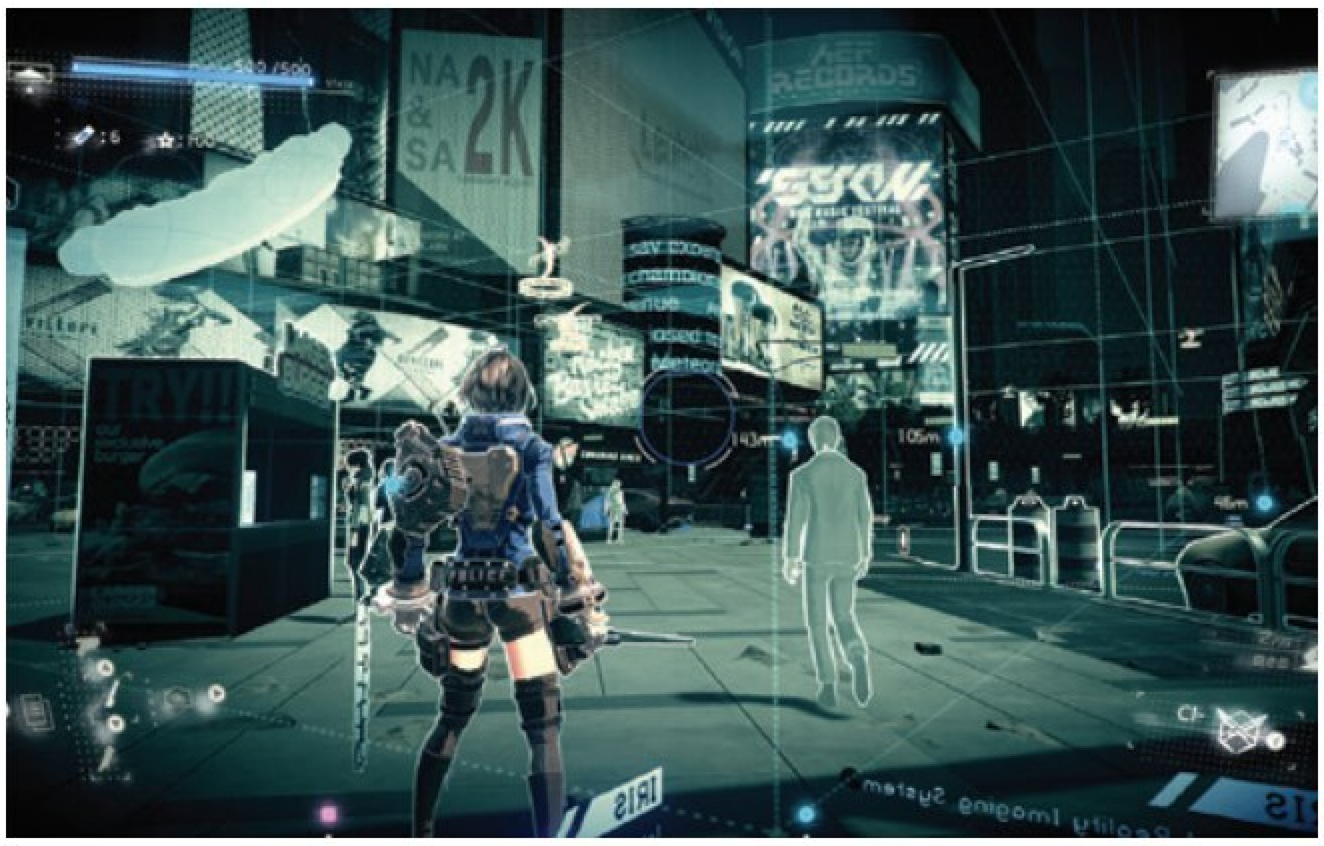
Taking place in a near-future Earth ravaged by invaders from another dimension called Chimeras and the Red Matter they leave behind, Astral Chain casts you as a member of the Neuron police force. You wield two distinct weapons: transforming batons called Exotons, and autonomous robots called Legions, tied to your hands through a bright blue chain.

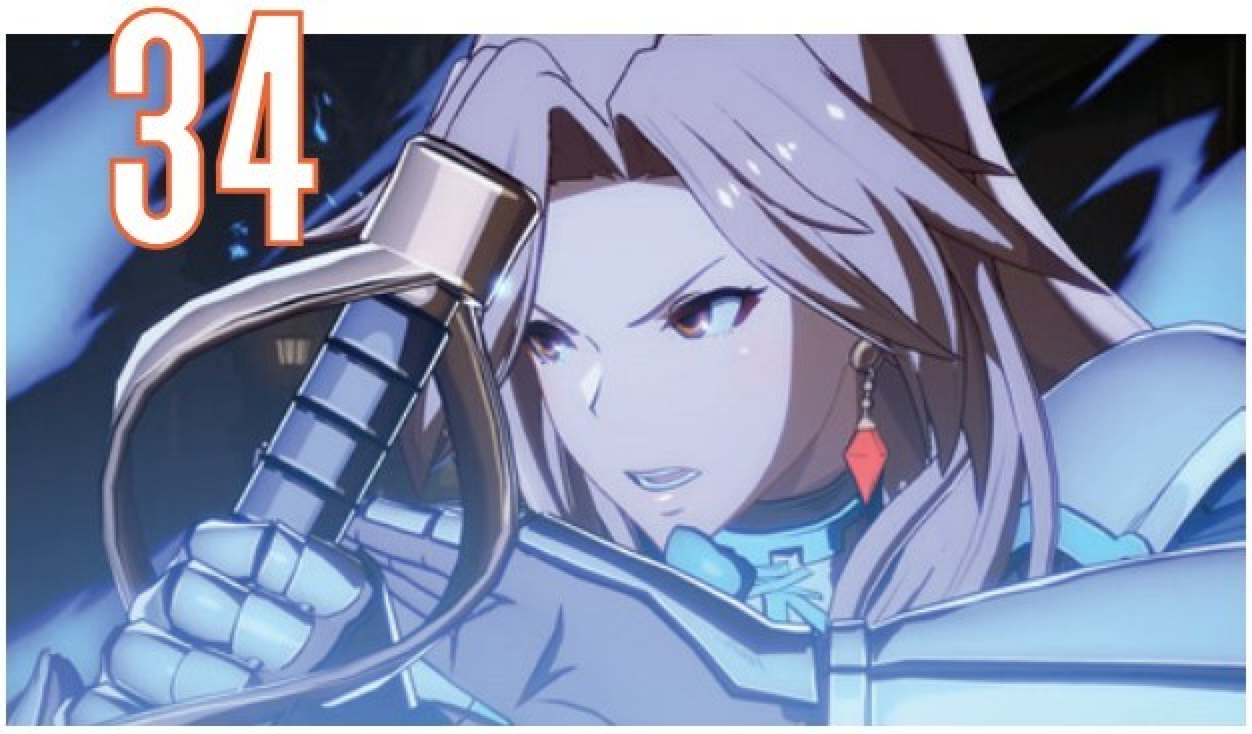
Legions effectively let you control a second character in battle. When summoned they attack automatically, augmenting your Exoton attacks (which can shift from a baton, a heavy sword, and a gun on the fly), but you can move them around using the right analog stick. If you manage to encircle an enemy with the chain that connects you and your Legion, you'll bind them, letting you get some free attacks in. Other stylish maneuvers include doling out sync attacks after properly dodging enemy blows, sending out your Legion toward an airborne enemy then zipping over to them yourself, and finishing moves that reward you with valuable enemy cores if you pull them off.

Five different Legions give you lots of room to experiment. While the sword Legion is effective at melee range, the arrow Legion can dole out damage from afar, and the axe Legion can quickly block attacks. You can also swap Legions out mid-fight, letting you mix up your play style. A skill tree lets you add new maneuvers for different Legions along with passive bonuses, which gives combat a strong degree of customization.

Astral Chain breaks up its fights with some light investigative sequences, which often act like side quests. Legions can help analyze crime scenes, clean up Red Matter around town, and subdue rowdy civilians. Their invisibility to the naked eye also allows them to eavesdrop on bystanders for clues. Some side quests have you diving into the Astral Realm and fighting enemies to help resolve people's problems, and these sections look to have some light puzzle elements to them.

The mix of two-character combat, light exploration, and strong sense of style has us stoked to see if Platinum can deliver another outstanding action game on Switch when it hits late next month. **» *Suriel Vazquez***





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GRANBLUE FANTASY VERSUS

Granblue joins the fighting ring

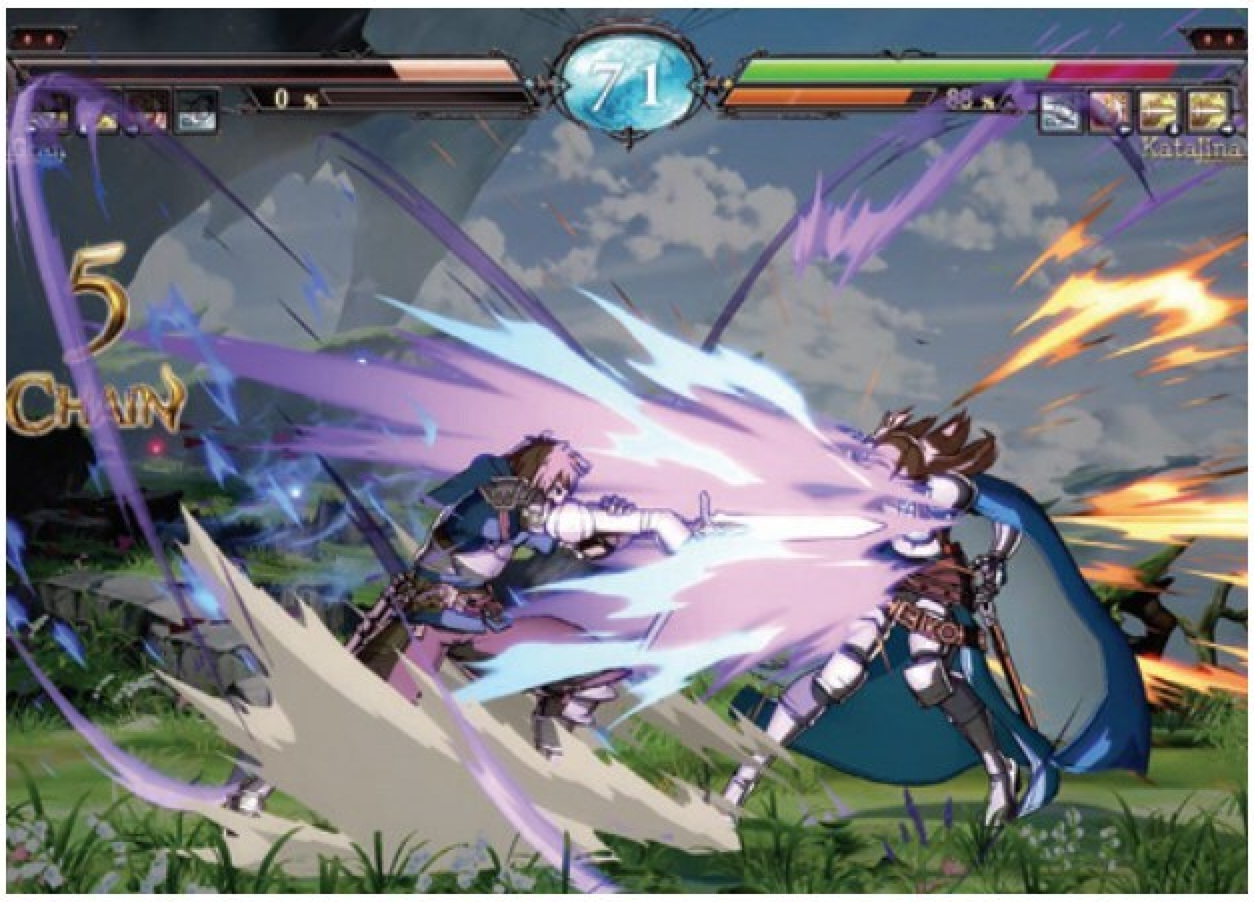
Platform: PS4 **Style:** 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)
Publisher: XSeed **Developer:** Arc System Works
Release: 2019

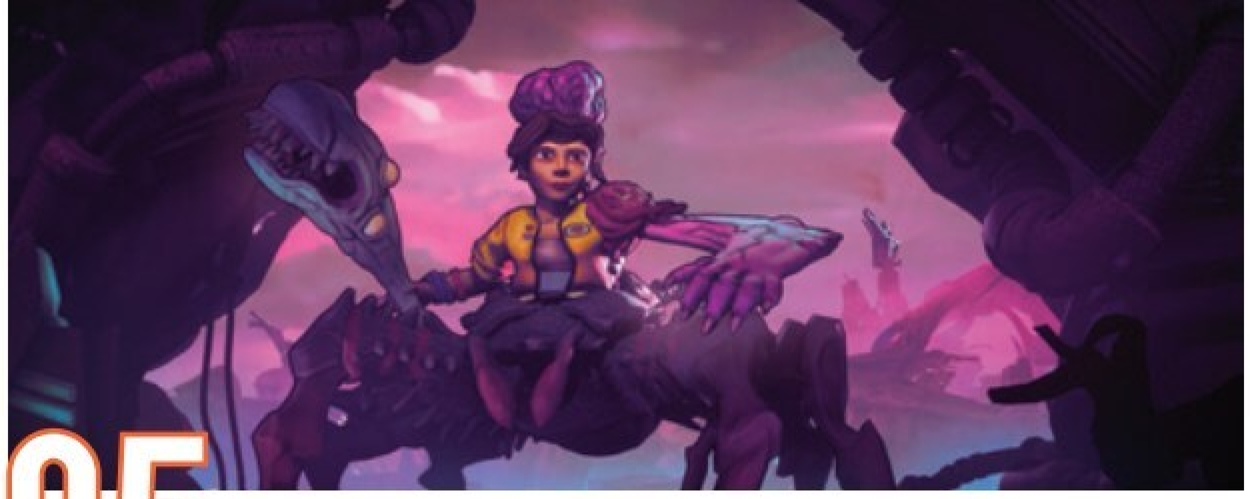
The last few years have been quite the ride for fighting game developer Arc System Works. Once known almost exclusively for Guilty Gear, and eventually caught in a battle over the rights to that series, the studio has become the first name on a shortlist for developers looking to transform their licenses into high-quality 2D fighting games like Persona 4 Arena and Dragon Ball FighterZ. Now with Granblue Fantasy Versus, Arc Systems Works is bringing a famous Japanese mobile RPG to console in the form of a fast and frenetic fighter.

The lineup of characters draws from the cast of the role-playing game, including the titular protagonist Gran, the imperial knight Katalina, the wrestler Ladiva, and more. Compared to FighterZ's neon-bright explosion of colors, Granblue Fantasy Versus is subdued, with a painterly watercolor style adorning all the character models as they strike and parry.

The new fighter tries to be more accessible than other Arc System Works titles. While you can do special moves just as you would in a Street Fighter or Guilty Gear game, there is also a special move button that, when paired with directions, performs different special moves. The end result is something a bit more like Super Smash Bros., that lets novice players keep up with different skill levels through smart dodges and mind games rather than just quarter-circle executions.

The mobile and browser RPG boasts over 25 million players in Japan, though a lack of an official mobile English release has stymied its popularity overseas. Granblue Fantasy Versus, however, has all the qualities of a fighting game that could take the world by storm by attracting both old and new fans alike. **» *Imran Khan***





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RAD

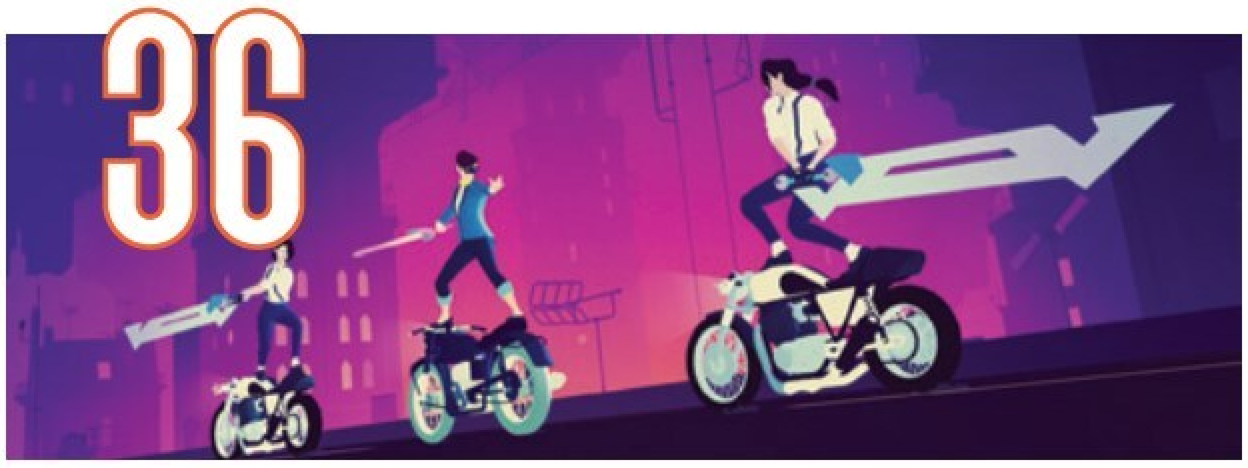
Everybody loves the post-apocalyptic '80s

Platform: PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
Style: 1-Player Action **Publisher:** Bandai Namco
Developer: Double Fine **Release:** August 20

Double Fine may now belong under the Microsoft umbrella, but the studio is still dedicated to making the same quirky, creative, and personality-filled video games they have been known for over the years. Rad exemplifies this design style with its colorful aesthetic, absurd story premise, and surprisingly tight gameplay.

At the game's E3 demo, we got a chance to start from the beginning of Rad's post-apocalyptic story. We chose a character, any number of designed teenagers with different perks for adventuring, and ventured into the irradiated wasteland for the first time.

Fans of action games with rogue-lite elements like Binding of Isaac should find a lot to like with Rad, as the game seems designed to scratch that particular itch. For those who just like Double Fine's trademark personality coupled with an aggressive '80s aesthetic, Rad seems to satiate that desire, too. **» *Imran Khan***



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SAYONARA: WILD HEARTS

An interactive pop album

Platform: Switch **Style:** 1-Player Rhythm/Music
Publisher: Annapurna Interactive **Developer:** Simogo
Release: 2019

Sayonara: Wild Hearts is an eclectic take on the rhythm genre. Instead of watching notes scroll down the screen as music plays, you take part in an interactive music video. In my demo I regularly switched between quick-time event button-presses and motorcycle scenes in which I had full control as I collected notes strewn on the road.

The music is a mix of candy-coated synth-pop tracks that felt appropriate with the art style. The game is structured like an album, and because of the lack of repetition and hard restarts, before I knew it I had played about half a dozen or so tracks.

Developer Simogo (Device 6, Year Walk) has quietly developed an impeccable track record over the years, and Sayonara: Wild Hearts doesn't look like it'll break it when it comes to Switch and other unannounced platforms later this year. **» *Suriel Vazquez***

BLEEDING EDGE

37

A familiar (but different) online experience

Platform: *Xbox One • PC* ***Style:*** *1 to 8-Player Online Action* ***Publisher:*** *Xbox Game Studios*
Developer: *Ninja Theory* ***Release:*** *TBA*

An online 4v4 third-person fighter isn't necessarily in the wheelhouse of the developer behind DmC: Devil May Cry, Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, and Enslaved: Odyssey to the West, but the team has the chops to deliver in-your-face melee combat about as well as any studio out there. Seeing that expertise unfold through class-based characters is fascinating to the point that Bleeding Edge should be on the radar of Overwatch fans.

Ninja Theory's inspiration from Blizzard's renowned shooter isn't subtle. The character designs, their unique powers, the user interface, ultimate attacks, and overall visual style scream Overwatch, but Bleeding Edge's intense melee combat gives it a flavor all its own. Each of the playable characters is wildly different, falling into the familiar classes of DPS, tank, and support. One character can turn invisible to get a drop on enemies, another can ride on a rocket which explodes when it hits an opponent. Some character abilities aid the team, such as a field that can slow adversaries.

While most characters are designed for close-range play, some are better at a range, wielding weapons like a chain gun or a grapple that can pull an enemy. The combat is fluid and fun, offering depth in abilities, strategy in managing their cooldowns, and evasive maneuvers to get a drop on foes.

The big question is how much depth there will be. Right now, Ninja Theory has designed two modes: an objective-control mode, and something called Power Cells, which pushes players to grab cells and drop them in areas.

Ninja Theory isn't revealing when the game will release, but you can give it a test drive today by signing up for the technical alpha. **» *Andrew Reiner***

NHL 20

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The snipers take center stage

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One* ***Style:*** *1 to 4-Player Sports (12-Player Online)* ***Publisher:*** *EA Sports*
Developer: *EA Vancouver* ***Release:*** *September 13*

Last year, the NHL franchise took a stride forward by improving its skating mechanics. For this year's edition, that focus shifts to highlighting the league's most dangerous snipers.

For the first time in the series, NHL 20 introduces signature shots for some of the league's most visible goal scorers, from Alexander Ovechkins' unstoppable one-timer, to cover athlete Auston Matthews' silky half-drag release. In addition, EA Vancouver spent time adding more contextual shot animations, reworking goaltending, and improving puck pickups.

Last year's introduction of World of Chel proved popular with players, so EA spent a considerable amount of its bandwidth improving the experience with weekly Chel Challenges that offer rare vanity rewards, four new outdoor rinks, offline Ones play, and a new Eliminator variant of Ones and Threes that whittles down the player pool from 81 skaters to one player or team to rule them all.

The franchise mode took a big step forward with the revamped scouting system last year, and wannabe GMs have more new systems to dig into in NHL 20 with the introduction of a coaching carousel, a reworked morale system, a trade finder, and the return of line-chemistry concerns when building your roster.

Whatever mode you're playing, you can look forward to a brand-new broadcast package with more vibrant graphics and new announcers. James Cybulski and Ray Ferraro replace Doc & Eddie in the booth, and EA says since the duo is local they've been able to record 300 hours of commentary as opposed to the 30 hours they used to get.

NHL 20 may not have one signature improvement that sounds revolutionary, but the collective changes should hopefully build on last year's momentum and improve several modes at once. Now, if only they could rework Be a Pro mode… **» *Matt Bertz***

HERE TO CREATE
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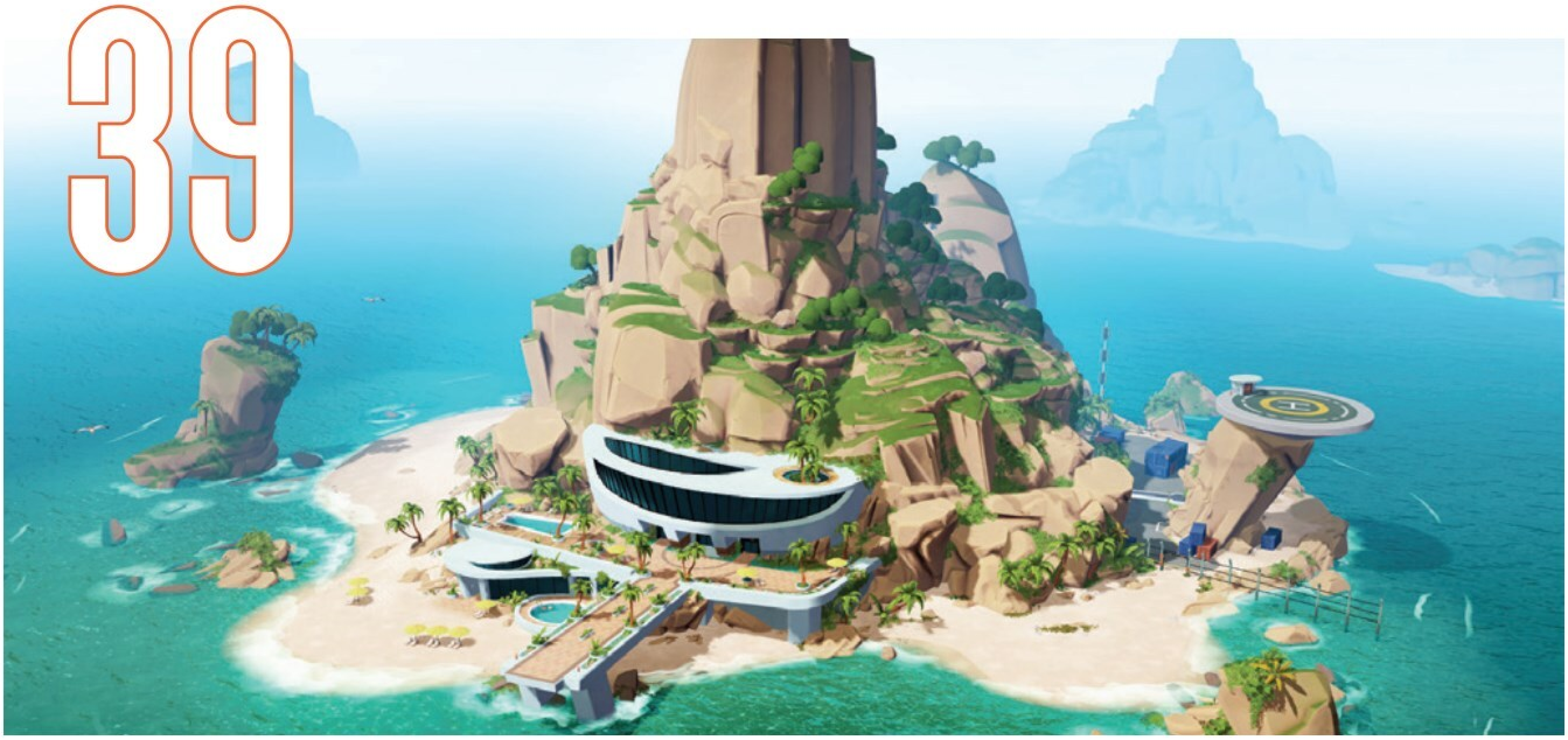


EVIL GENIUS 2: WORLD DOMINATION

Bringing out your inner Bond villain

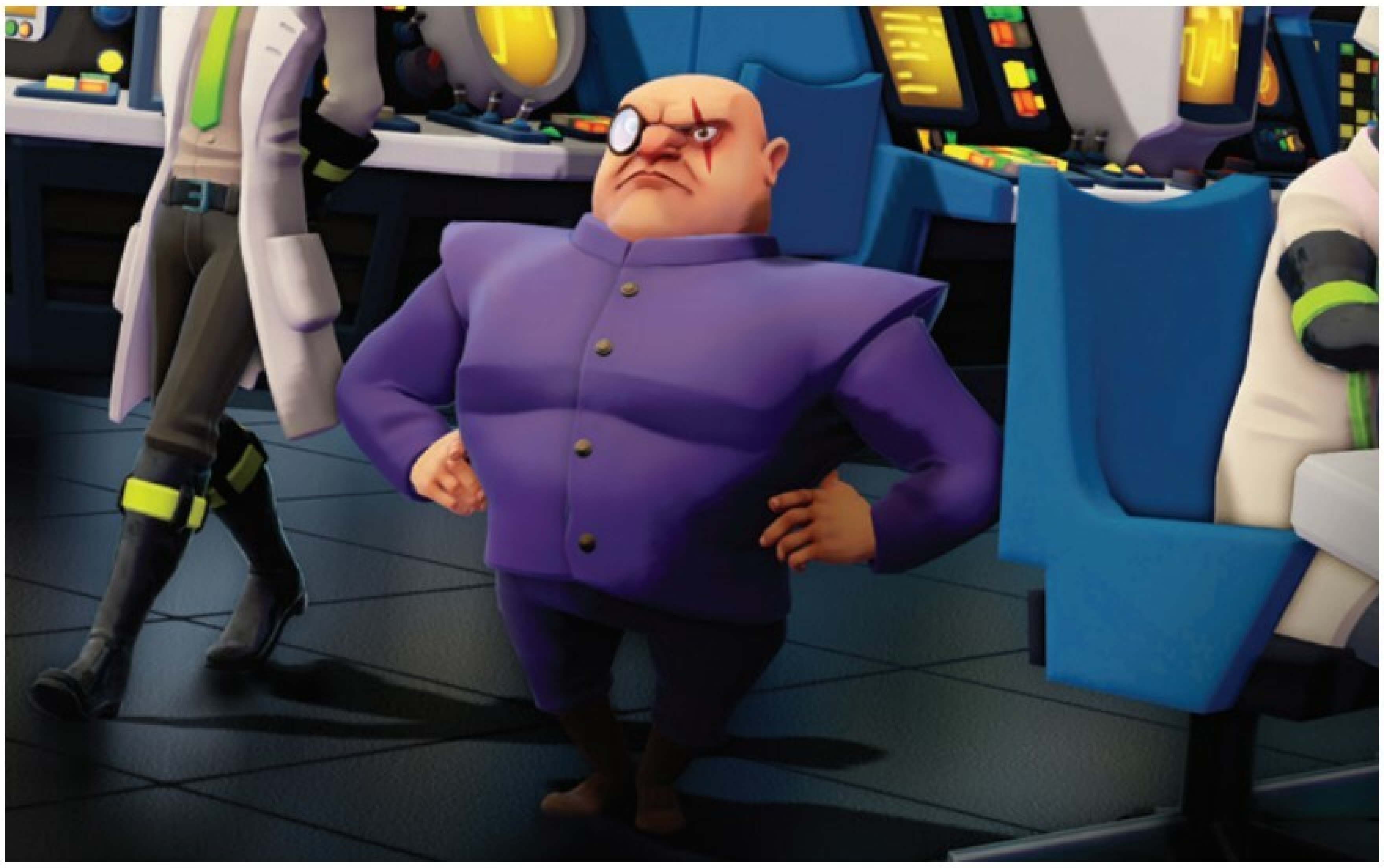
Platform: *PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Simulation* ***Publisher:*** *Rebellion* ***Developer:*** *Rebellion* ***Release:*** *2020*

So many games cast you as the debonair hero trying to infiltrate a criminal mastermind's base. After more than a decade and a half since the first Evil Genius, players finally have a second shot at taking over the world.

You assume control of one of four evil geniuses, each with their own attributes. Rebellion is currently talking about two of them: Maximilian, the character you controlled in the original Evil Genius, and Red Ivan, a henchman from the first game who has ascended to the rank of full-fledged villain. While Maximilian has an all-around style of play, Red Ivan is more about brute force, with an unhealthy obsession with explosives.

Once you're in control of your evil genius, it's time to construct your lair. You choose an island and build your front – after all, every good hideout needs to look like a legitimate business. In my demo, it's a casino. From there, you can lay out the hallways, rooms, and training facilities of your hideout's heart. You can also build special rooms, like a super serum lab that turns your minions into super soldiers, or a brainwashing station to make sure any infiltrators report back to their superiors with an "all clear."

If you want to boost your minions' skills, training stations do the trick, while barracks and video game stations boost morale. Minions are divided into three classes: science, muscle, and deception. You also have stronger special henchmen who are designated as your underlings. Outside of the evil genius you're controlling, henchmen are the only characters you can give direct orders to. They are also much better equipped to stand toe-to-toe with any agents that make it inside your base, so it's a good idea to keep them close.

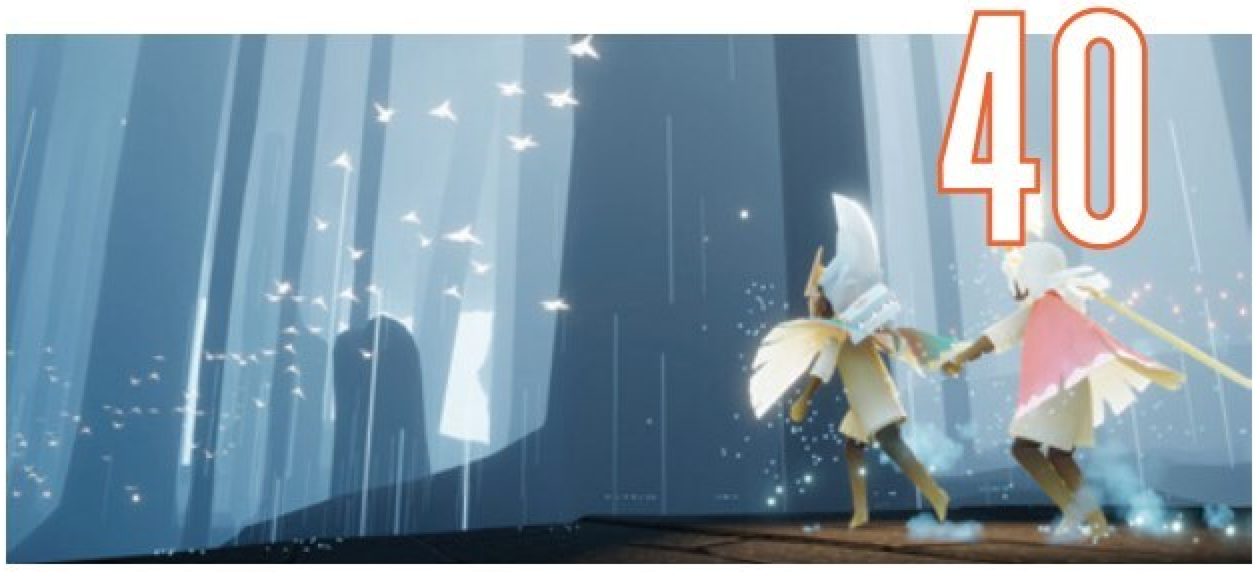


A big part of creating your impenetrable lair is setting up intricate trap networks. In my demo, I watch as a secret agent enters a narrow hallway before a fan blows them through a laser grid that stuns them, and then into a shark tank. You can arrange these traps however you want, but finding a perfect network to combo together traps proves most effective.

Your campaign comes to a screeching halt if an agent manages to penetrate your defenses and kill your evil genius, so defending your lair against the Forces of Justice is important. But your ultimate goal is right there in the game's title: world domination. To work toward this lofty aspiration, you complete various objectives, with potentially hundreds to choose from. These wacky missions include selling the British royal family, kidnapping the governor of Maine, and literally baking Alaska.

If you fall short of taking over the planet, the deep suite of base customization, different playstyles for the four evil geniuses, and oddball humor should make your next playthrough just as lively as your last.

» Brian Shea



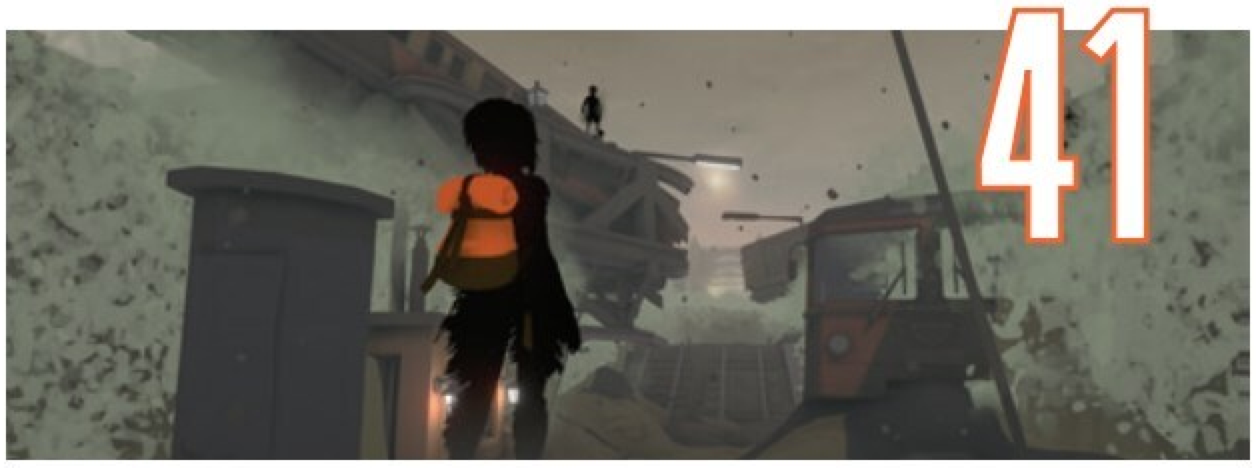
40

SKY: CHILDREN OF THE LIGHT

The better angels of our nature

Platform: *iOS* ***Style:*** *Online Multiplayer Action*
Publisher: *thatgamecompany*
Developer: *thatgamecompany* ***Release:*** *July 11*

The creators of Journey and Flower are putting the finishing touches on their next project, which impressed us at the show with its beautiful visuals and music, as well as its premise of social-focused exploration and altruism. Simple controls let you join family, friends, and strangers as you explore various realms, discover secrets, and freely soar across a cloud-filled sky, all while gathering new hair styles, masks, outfits, and even musical instruments for your character. Along the way, you share and build intimacy with others. The imminent release on iOS is supposedly just the beginning, as the Children of the Light will fly to Android, PC, Mac, and consoles at some later point, perhaps even with cross-play options. **» *Matt Miller***



41

SEA OF SOLITUDE

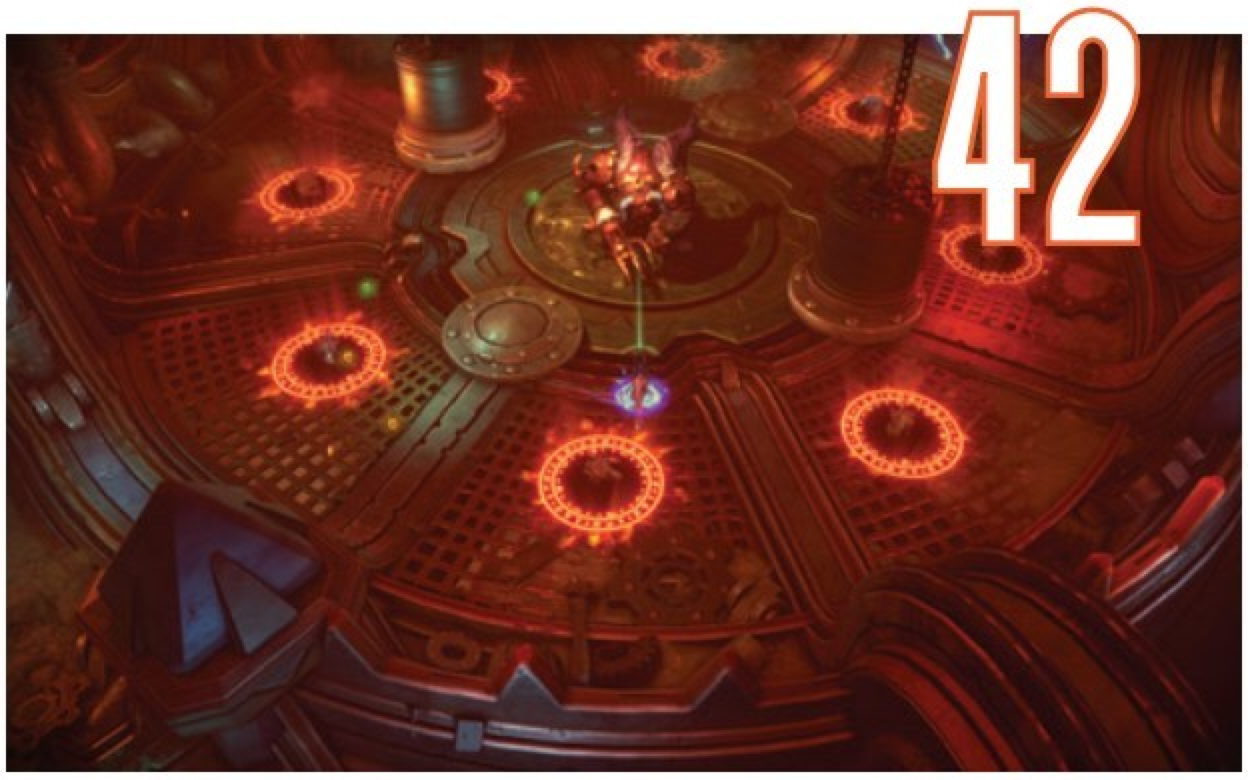
Facing your demons

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Adventure*
Publisher: *Electronic Arts* ***Developer:*** *Jo-Mei Games*
Release: *July 5*

Taking place in a city half-submerged by water, Sea of Solitude is an adventure game where you play as a young woman named Kay, who attempts to find out why she became a beast. You traverse the town by boat and face your demons who appear as literal monsters.

Sea of Solitude explores themes of mental health based on the creators' lives. Creative director Cornelia Geppert came up with the idea when she was at a low point and felt unfulfilled at her job.

Geppert says the game isn't about defeating monsters but instead overcoming them and learning more about Kay. Rather than direct conflict, you either find your way around enemies or solve puzzles by searching the environment. Sea of Solitude aims to capture an interesting world through the eyes of loneliness, a unique angle that has us eager to see more. **» *Elise Favis***



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DARKSIDERS GENESIS

Exploring the pre-apocalypse

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • Stadia • PC*
Style: *1 or 2- Player Action/Role-Playing* ***Publisher:*** *THQ Nordic*
Developer: *Airship Syndicate* ***Release:*** *2019*

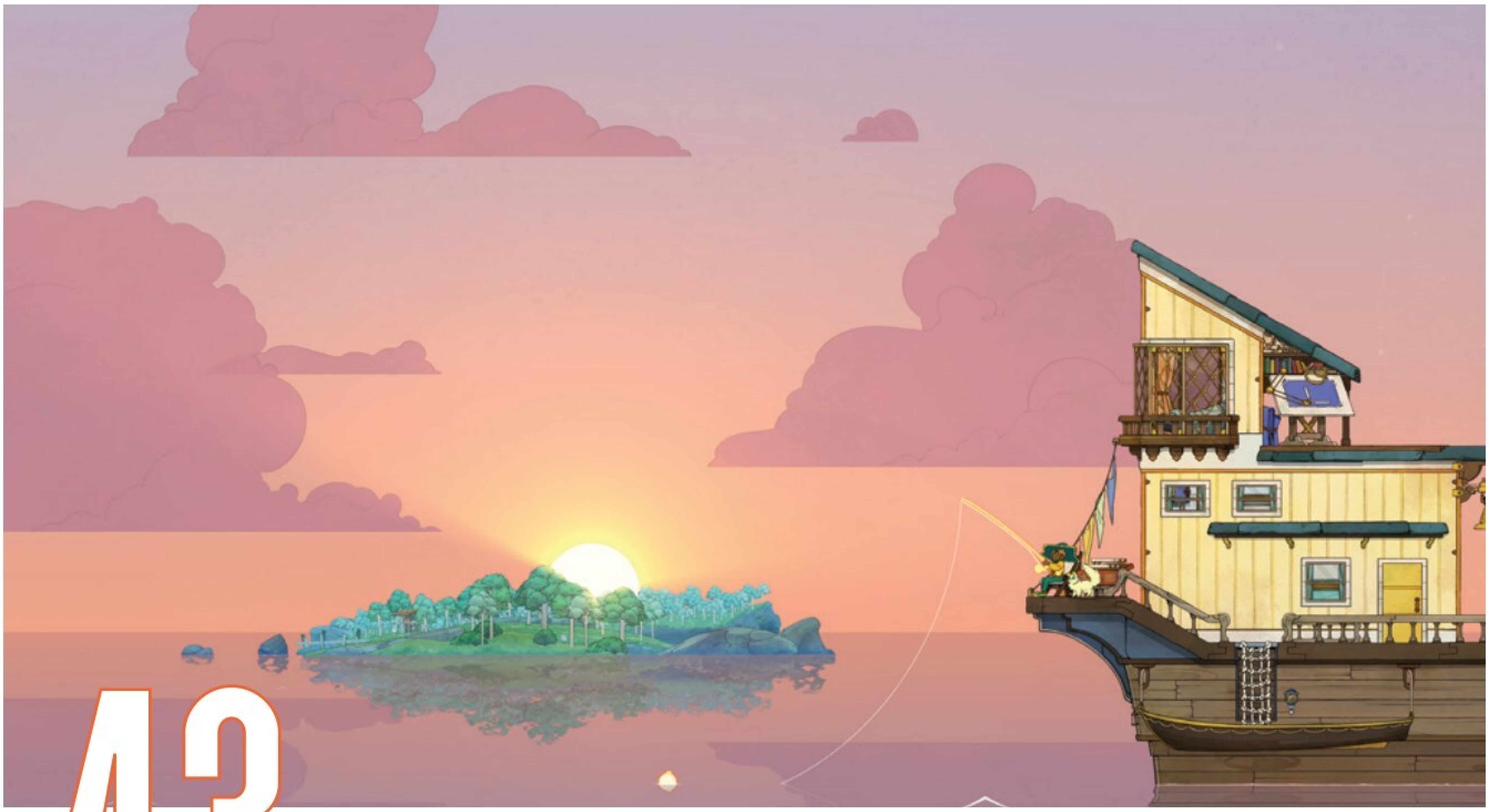
After the implosion of the original THQ, several Darksiders creators formed a new studio called Airship Syndicate and released the turn-based RPG Battle Chasers: Nightwar. That core team never expected to work on the Darksiders series again, but they jumped at the chance to team up with Gunfire Games on a spin-off prequel that explores the events leading up to War's trial.

This co-op friendly, top-down, hack-and-slash RPG gives fans their first chance to play as the horseman Strife. Unlike his fellow horsemen, Strife is a trickster who likes to keep his distance and attack with a variety of guns and mines. He provides a nice balance to War, who plays much like he did in the original Darksiders, using a variety of sword-based combos. Both characters slowly build up a special meter that temporarily turns them into fiery demons capable of laying waste to everything in their path.

In a single-player game, you swap between Strife and War, and the character in reserve slowly regenerates lost health. In co-op, each player controls one of the horsemen, and they can resurrect their fallen teammate with a limited amount of vitality.

Flipping between single-player and co-op also alters players' approach to puzzles. In single-player, we watched War throw a bomb at a switch and then time its explosion with the pull of a second switch. With both switches thrown, a door opened. In co-op both players just hit the two switches at the same time. This is one of the simpler puzzles, but Airship Syndicate says it wants to put a greater emphasis on puzzles and return to the Zelda inspirations present in the original Darksiders.

Our hands-on time with Genesis at E3 reconfirmed our desire to return to this fantastical world. We're excited to see Strife in action, and Genesis looks like it should be a great time whether you play solo or with a friend. **» *Ben Reeves***



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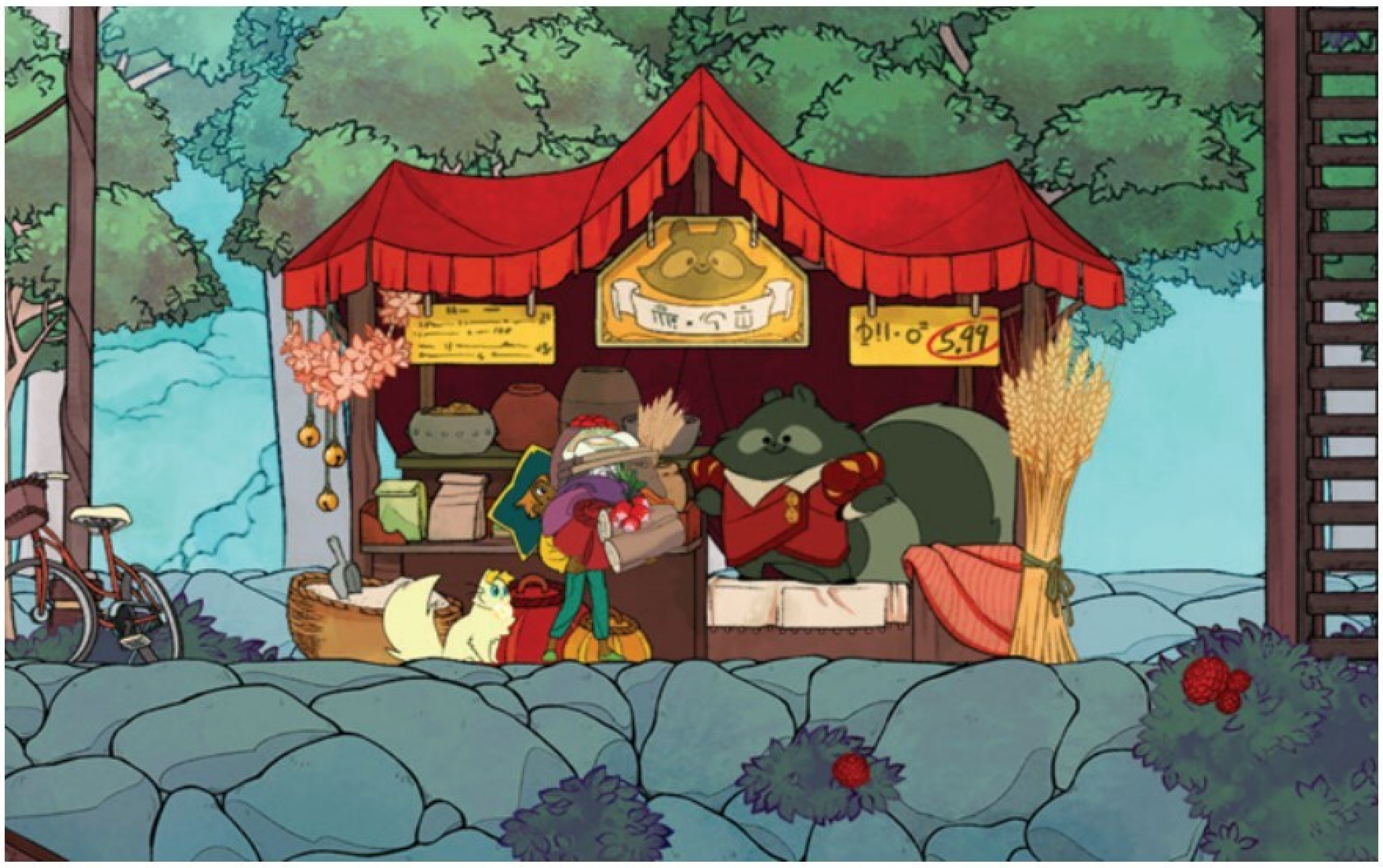
SPIRITFARER

Saying goodbye

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC* ***Style:*** *1 or 2-Player Adventure* ***Publisher:*** *Thunder Lotus Games*
Developer: *Thunder Lotus Games* ***Release:*** *2020*

The standard image of a caretaker ferrying the dead away from the world of the living conjures images of Charon crossing the river Styx from Greek mythology. While that can sound grim, Spiritfarer has a different take on the journey. The game's ferrymaster is Stella, who along with her pet cat Daffodil takes the dead to their ultimate destination and offers a measure of peace in doing so.

To transport souls to the other side, Stella must build up her boat, first by talking to her passengers about their needs, and then by placing the required room or platform on the boat itself. Stella's vessel can be upgraded, and its shape evolves as the layout expands and new travelers come aboard. The various rooms represent the personalities of their passengers, and side activities such as fishing, cooking, tending crops, and weaving help pass the time aboard the ship. These tasks also generate resources, and are part of fleshing out the personalities of the characters under your watch and your relationships with them. In the brief demo I played at E3 (the developer says that game takes about 30 hours to finish), one way to collect resources was during a nighttime thunderstorm, platforming around the boat trying to position Stella under the lightning strikes to harness their power.



The souls on your boat aren't there simply to be transported; unraveling and understanding their stories and the lives they are leaving behind is also a major part of the experience. You travel to various places in the world, building affinity with your charges by giving them gifts you've crafted and solving puzzles in the world. Spiritfarer is a gorgeous 2D title with the vivid look of a Studio Ghibli movie, and the camera zooms in during appropriate moments, like when exploring the interiors of buildings.

Spiritfarer aims not only to have Stella help wayward souls on their way to the afterlife (a friend can also control Daffodil in local co-op), but also allow them to leave their legacy on the world and impact Stella and the player themselves. Video games are often about controlling and shaping your own destiny through your actions, but in Spiritfarer, it's just as much about listening to others.

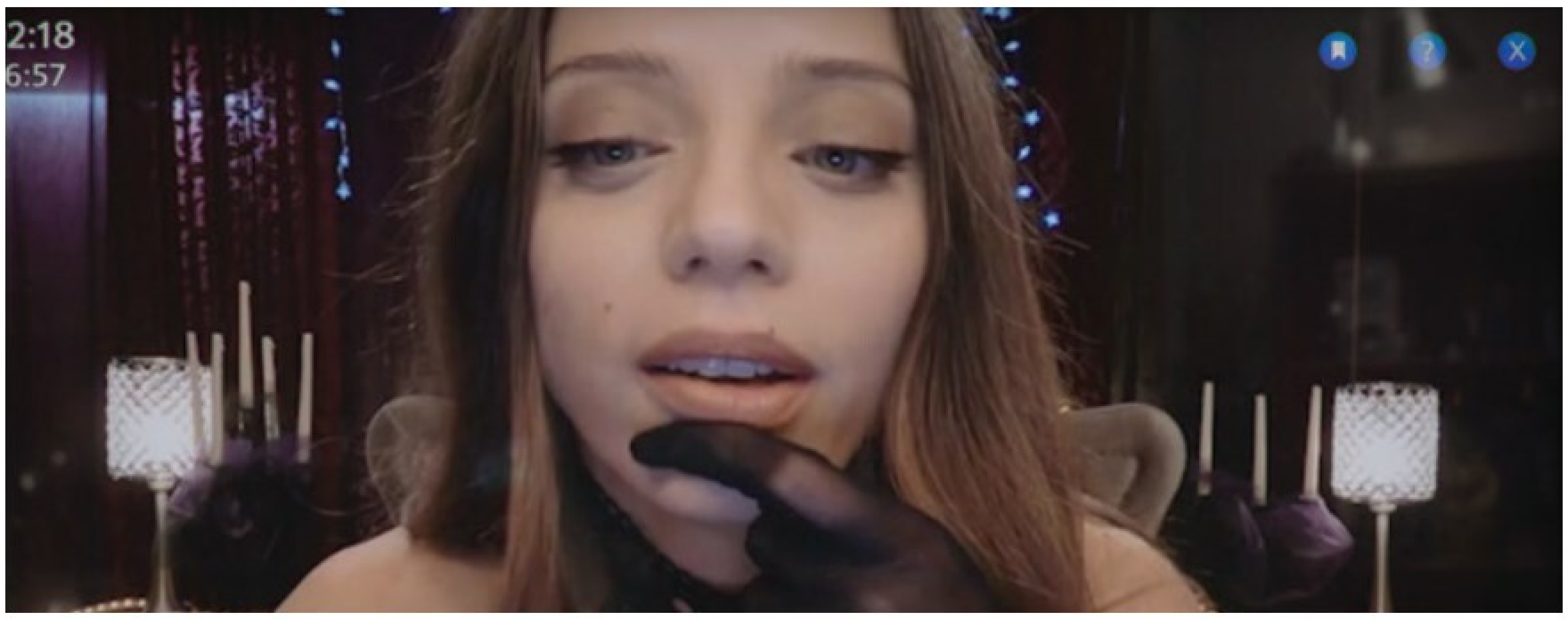
» Matthew Kato

TELLING LIES

44

Searching for truth

Platform: *PC • iOS* ***Style:*** *1-Player Adventure* ***Publisher:*** *Annapurna Interactive*
Developer: *Sam Barlow, Furious Bee Limited* ***Release:*** *2019*



As video games grow as a medium, developers are getting more creative in the ways in which interactivity can be used to tell a story. Sam Barlow's crime mystery Her Story did just that when it launched back in 2015, challenging players' notion of what an interactive experience can be. Barlow's follow-up, Telling Lies, stays true to what made people connect with Her Story, but it expands the scope and depth to give players plenty to dissect.

Part of the fun of Her Story was being thrown into a mystery with very little context and slowly piecing things together. Everything had to be examined with a careful eye, often requiring you to read subtext and make inferences based on the smallest amount of information. That's not changing in Telling Lies, where you search a National Security Agency database and watch the private video conversations of four people who show very different sides of themselves to different people. You must figure out why the government would take an interest in this specific group, which Barlow has gone out of his way to keep mysterious. This E3 was our first look at the modern database you use to watch these conversations. At any given time, you are only seeing one side of an exchange, so there's a good amount to infer in terms of who the character is talking to and its place in the timeline. The new database is all about convenience. Typing in a word takes you right to the point where it's used in a conversation. You can then scrub forward and backward to get more context on its place in the larger discussion, which can span upwards of five minutes. You can also tap any word used during the exchange and bring up every instance of it to follow threads. A handy bookmark tool also makes it easy to go back to any points of interest later.

As with any good mystery, the less you know, the better it is going in, but it already looks like this is going to be quite a story to unravel. **» *Kimberley Wallace***

EMPIRE OF SIN

45

Building a dynasty out of blood and whiskey

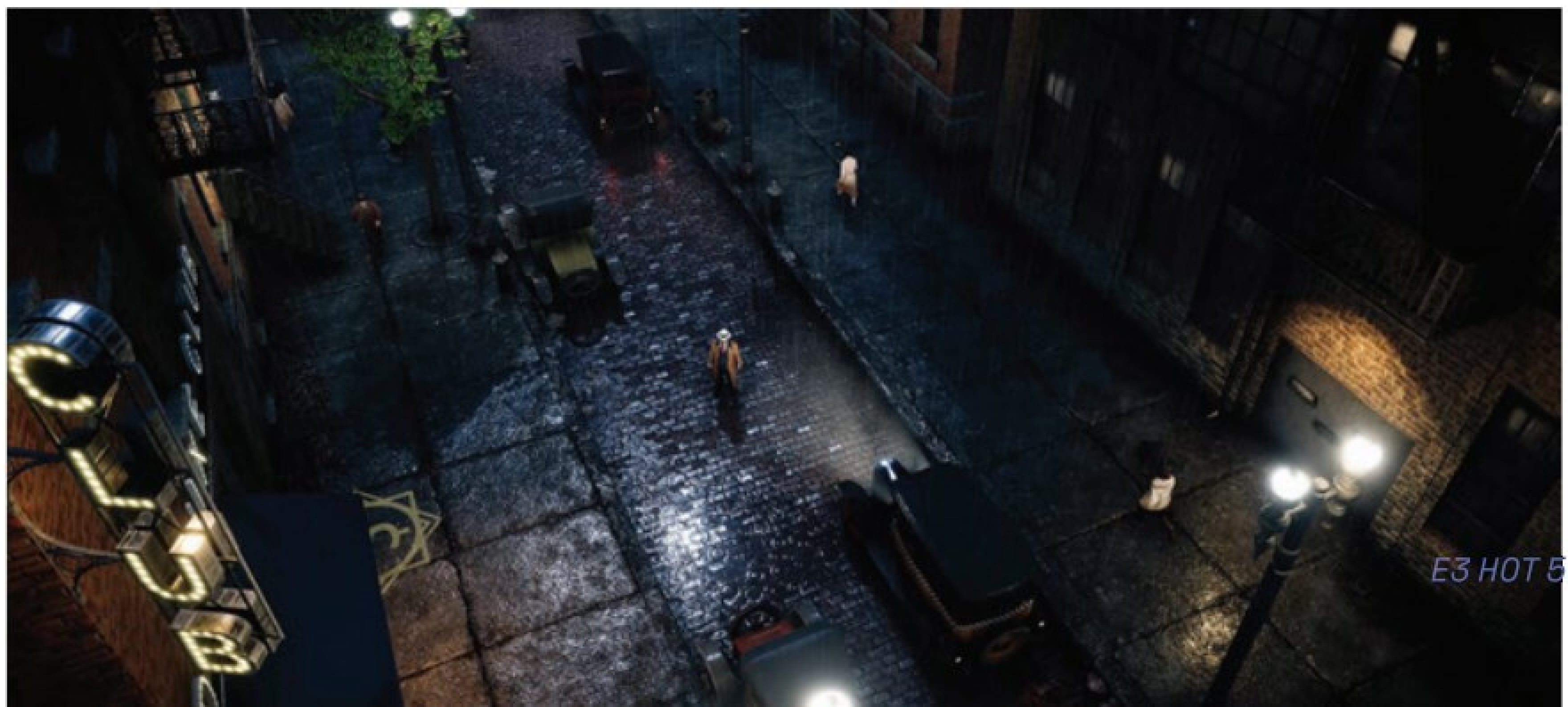
Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Role-Playing/Strategy*
Publisher: *Paradox Interactive* ***Developer:*** *Romero Games* ***Release:*** *2020*

Who hasn't, at least once in their lives, imagined themselves as a suit-wearing, Tommy Gun-wielding, cigar-chomping gangster living it up? Romero Games gives you the chance to do precisely that in Empire Of Sin, a hybrid role-playing/strategy game designed by Brenda Romero that casts you as one of 14 mob bosses in Chicago during the 1920s. Prohibition is in effect, but that hasn't stopped the streets from running with whiskey ... not to mention blood.

During your time as boss, whom you can select from seven real-world figures or seven fictional ones meant to embody the ethos of The Jazz Age, you can take over speakeasies by force and then upgrade their aesthetics so you can turn them into classy joints to keep police raids down. You also sit down with other bosses to form (probably temporarily) alliances to take on mutual foes, and you might even poison the alcohol in your own distillery to send it to your foes as a Trojan Horse gift of doom. Empire Of Sin's deep strategy, whether you're in tactical gun battles or deep-diving into the management simulation of your rackets, is impressive. This is doubly effective thanks to the pen-and-paper RPG-inspired character system.

Your boss and their underlings aren't just units to deploy in war, but characters who change over time. If your Al Capone executes enough people in battle, he'll earn a bloodthirsty trait, which endears him to certain factions but might disgust others and put a damper on your relationships. If one of your underbosses loves a soldier from an opposing family, there's a chance a Romeo and Juliet scenario might play out in a battle against that faction, with the lovers refusing to fight one another or even running away together. The empire with the most power at the end of the roaring '20s is the winner, but you might just have to sell your soul to get there.

Empire Of Sin's depth was one of the biggest surprises at this year's E3, and we're looking forward to duking it out with wits and bullets to become Mud City's kingpin early next year. **» *Javy Gwaltney***



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PES 2020

Konami's soccer franchise looks into the future

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC* ***Style:*** *1 to 4-Player Sports (22-Player Online)* ***Publisher:*** *Konami*
Developer: *Konami* ***Release:*** *September 10*

The Pro Evolution series has a new formal name – eFootball PES 2020 – in a strange bid by Konami to obnoxiously signal the company's esports aspirations. Nevertheless, fans need not be worried, as PES 2020 focuses on the core concerns of improving gameplay and the Master League franchise mode.

In past years, Master League has changed along the margins, but this year Konami introduces an expansive dialogue system that could produce repercussions throughout the mode, from player morale to transfers. Players select dialogue options for their managers – who can be former legendary players like Diego Maradona, Johan Cruyff, and Zico – with players and staff, whether it's for transfers, discussions about playing time, or club goals. All of these variables have been in the mode through the years, but the new dialogue system can hopefully both better surface these important situations as well as explore them more deeply than in the past.

The franchise mode also gets a boost with the developer's use of real-world data to drive transfers, both in terms of the amounts used and as a way to make the A.I.'s transfer moves more realistic. All together, these additions could give the mode a much-needed overhaul – including its visuals.

As much as Master League seemingly leans on its dialogue system and reworked transfer system, the gameplay also increases in complexity in an attempt at rejuvenation. Gameplay additions like players' Inspire skill, and contextual lob passes and trapping, rely on the A.I. to respond correctly to what's going on. The Inspire skill influences your teammates to move to open spaces in anticipation of sublime passes from maestros like Andrés Iniesta that cut through opposition lines. How this combines with the current run-triggering controls and your own expectations and abilities could open exciting new doors or just muddle your team's off-the-ball movements.

One tangible takeaway from my hands-on time is that dribbling – whether normally or by using new finesse dribbling on the right analog – is nice and tight. This gives you confidence that you can pass, shoot, sprint, or manipulate the ball on command. I also like how defenders' instinctual shot and pass blocks, as well as the overall physical play of this year's game, is shaping up.

We still have outstanding questions for the PES 2020, including how catch-up A.I. and player switching feels (MyClub fantasy mode and licensing details are coming later in the summer), as the series tries to regain the momentum it had a few years ago and prepare for the next home-console generation. ***» Matthew Kato***

GLOBAL PARTNER OF
FC BARCELONA

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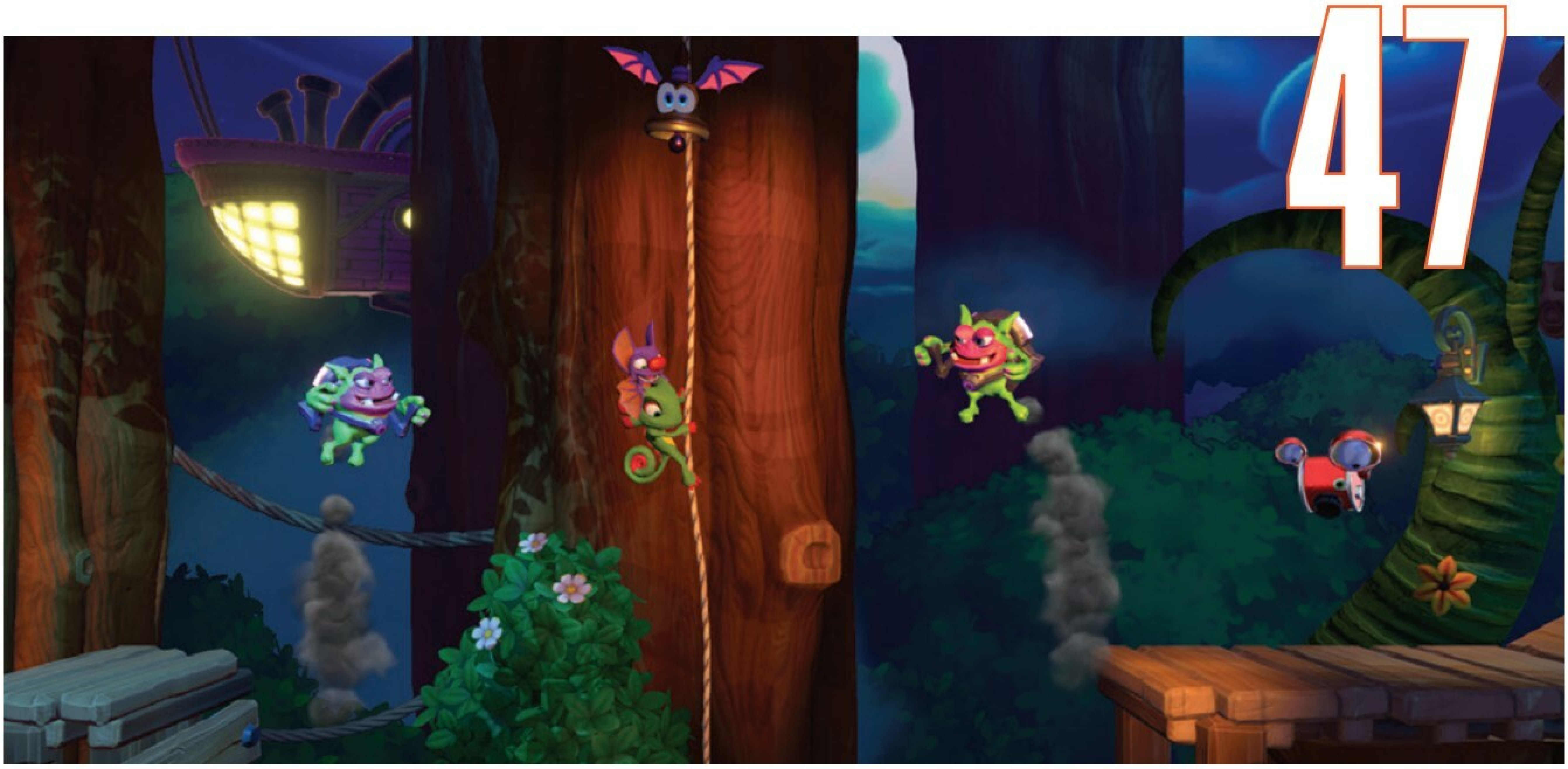


YOOKA-LAYLEE AND THE IMPOSSIBLE LAIR

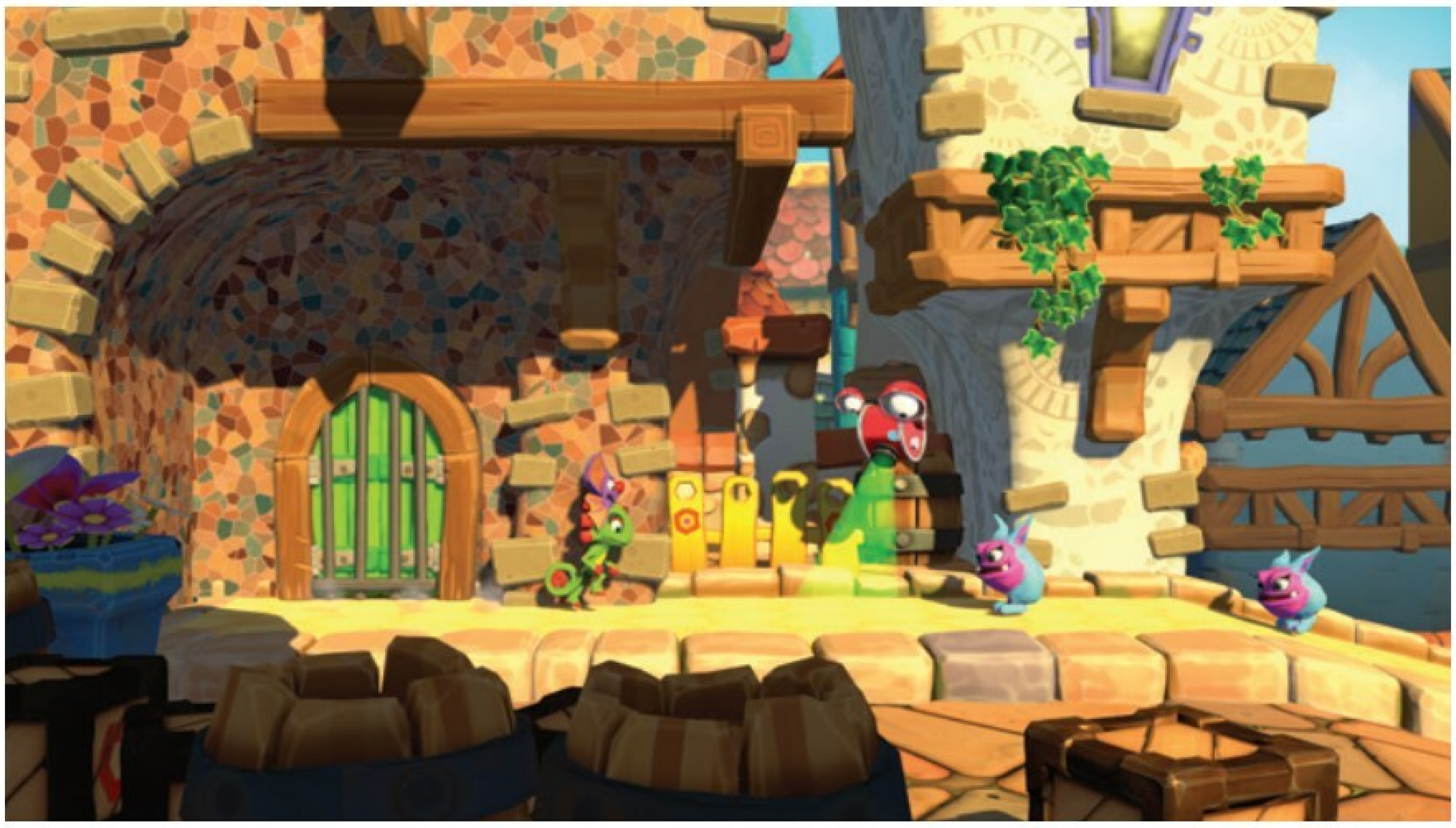
Gearing up for the ultimate challenge

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC* ***Style:*** *1-Player Platforming* ***Publisher:*** *Team17* ***Developer:*** *Playtonic* ***Release:*** *2019*

Developer Rare was a venerable hitmaker for Nintendo in the '90s with titles like Donkey Kong Country, Banjo-Kazooie, and GoldenEye 007. While Rare is now owned by Microsoft, several key members left to found Playtonic. The studio's first game, 2017's Yooka-Laylee, paid faithful homage to 3D platformers like Banjo-Kazooie, and now the team hopes to do the same for 2D platformers while modernizing the formula in all the right places.

Yooka-Laylee and The Impossible Lair is all about conquering Capital B's eponymous dungeon. The villainous bigwig is so confident in his defenses, you can walk right in as soon as you start the game. Don't expect to make it far, however – it lives up to the name. The early version I played (Playtonic tells me it's still being worked on and is very much subject to change) began with a challenging boss fight before dumping you into a room full of enemies, moving platforms, and timed fire pillars. To even stand a chance against the lair, you need to collect bees throughout the main game's 20 levels. Each bee you collect adds an extra hit point to your health.

Without any bees, the Yooka-Laylee tandem can take two hits; the first sends Laylee the bat flying, but Yooka can recover her if he's fast enough (think Yoshi in Super Mario World). In addition to losing a hit-point with Laylee gone, Yooka also loses several helpful moves.



With Laylee in tow, the team can twirl-jump, ground-pound, and perform a boosted roll. When Yooka's solo, he can't perform those moves and is instead limited to jumping, rolling, and grabbing items with his tongue.

The 20 stages consist of diverse themes, including forests, towns, and even a blimp floating through the sky. In addition to rewarding you with bees, they also introduce the elements you encounter when you finally begin your run in the Impossible Lair.

Between stages, you explore the hub world, which shifts the view to an isometric perspective. Playtonic designed the hub world to be a more relaxed experience than the mainline 2D stages, but in true Yooka-Laylee fashion, secrets and collectibles abound. In addition to quills, which are the main currency used to purchase items to bring into stages, you can also find a second state of each level.

These second states fundamentally change the original stage to offer a completely new experience. From dumping a ton of enemies into the environment to flooding a forest and turning it into a water level, this allows you to not only replay the stages with new elements, but also collect 20 more bees for a grand total of 40.

Even with all those extra hits you can take, the Impossible Lair looks to be a challenge. It's denser and four times as long as any other stage in the game, and there are no checkpoints. With Playtonic throwing down the gauntlet like that, I can't wait to accept the challenge when Yooka-Laylee and The Impossible Lair launches later this year. ***» Brian Shea***

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NO STRAIGHT ROADS

Marching to a different beat

Platform: *PS4 • PC* **Style:** *1 or 2-Player Action/Adventure* **Publisher:** *Sold-Out Software*
Developer: *Metronomik* **Release:** *2020*

No Straight Roads is about the power of music, but the gameplay doesn't revolve around hitting notes as they come flying toward you. Rather than simulating musical prowess, the team at Metronomik is creating an action/adventure game that taps into every person's innate sense of rhythm.

Thematically, No Straight Roads is steeped in music. You (and an optional co-op partner) control members of an indie band to take down the company at the heart of an evil EDM empire. You move through a stylish world and attack with instruments and notes, but the soundtrack plays an important role in your success. The on-screen action is synced to the beat, so getting in the groove can give you an edge. For instance, a boss might perform a slam attack just as the song's chorus kicks in. That can help you time your evasion, so listening carefully and learning how enemies react at certain points in the song is advantageous – but not required.

While music is a core pillar of No Straight Roads, the game also holds up as an action-driven experience. Our demo at E3 showcased an impressive multi-phase fight against a self-obsessed DJ. What begins as an encounter in a club escalates into a fight of cosmic proportions. By the final phase, the DJ is enormous, you're moving around in space, and the bad guy sends whole planets zooming toward you. As the battle continues, the different tracks of the DJ's boss music seamlessly shift between various compositions (like rock and EDM) to give each phase a distinct feel.

Metronomik is a new indie studio (co-founded by Final Fantasy XV lead gameplay designer Wan Hazmer), but the team's experience is already apparent. With fun action, striking art, and an immersive soundtrack, No Straight Roads looks to be hitting all the right notes. **» *Joe Juba***

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THE DARK PICTURES – MAN OF MEDAN

Deadly faces and places

Platform: *PS4 • Xbox One • PC* **Style:** *1-Player Adventure* **Publisher:** *Bandai Namco*
Developer: *Supermassive Games* **Release:** *August 30*

Until Dawn developer Supermassive Games has been working hard on its five-game anthology that mashes up different horror subgenres. Its opener, Man of Medan, is just around the corner and it looks to deliver what we loved about Until Dawn: jump scares, deep relationship building, intense choices, and twists on common standbys in the horror genre.

Man of Medan follows a group of friends and siblings on what is supposed to be a memorable vacation. However, it becomes memorable for all the wrong reasons when they're kidnapped and then a nasty storm transports them straight to a spooky ship. Expect eerie surroundings and deadly enemies to jump out at any moment as you search the ship to learn the reasons behind its existence and locate a way off it.

While the horror factor looks promising, Supermassive also put a lot of effort into the branching paths and relationship building – something from Until Dawn it wanted to evolve. A character can still die at any moment and split-second decisions abound, but expect more variation in the scenes based on your choices. Relationships have more depth and reward; if you invest the time and min/max certain relationships, you unlock bonus sequences. You also can have unique relationship states depending on how you foster your bonds, opening up different dialogue.

If Until Dawn and its big twist taught us anything, it's that Supermassive loves to take players by surprise. The team uses tropes and stereotypes to build out the world and its characters, but then it turns them on their head for some intriguing and shocking outcomes. Man of Medan looks to follow suit, leaving us eager to see how it all shakes out. **» *Kimberley Wallace***

50

SCAVENGERS

Get in, mix it up, get out

Platform: *PC* **Style:** *Online Multiplayer Shooter* **Publisher:** *Midwinter Entertainment*
Developer: *Midwinter Entertainment* **Release:** *2020*

Multiplayer games with permadeath are en vogue, but Midwinter Entertainment hopes Scavengers stands out by introducing some crucial twists on the concept, including a PvE element and a gameplay loop intended to push players to do more than just shoot each other.

Scavengers shares DNA with battle royale games, but a few differences mean it doesn't quite fit the bill. Each of the 30-plus players split into three-person squads are working toward the collective goal of extracting 60 samples from the frozen wasteland of Earth instead of trying to be the last ones standing. In order to win, your team needs to collect the most samples out of any team remaining and make it to the dropship deployed by Mother (an A.I. controlling the giant space station you drop in from) once all the samples have been rounded up.

You arrive on Earth helpless, and must find resources, guns, and items around the map as you play. Each player takes on one of eight character classes, each with their own toolset and character ability. However, you have to build your character up by finding materials, which you use to upgrade your weapons, armor, and items.

These perks come in handy when you fight the A.I. enemies around the map, which often hoard supplies and samples. These battles act as a warm-up, but also a way to interact with fellow players. Depending on the strength and number of opponents you face, and if another squad happens to find you before you take them on, you may want to cooperate with another team to take on these opponents or wait until the other squad engages before ambushing them.

The gunplay is still a little rickety and A.I. opponents were a breeze in the match we played, but with some tuning, Scavengers could shape up to be a strong multiplayer offering when it hits next year.

» *Suriel Vazquez*

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gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH

91 Super Mario Maker 2

Super Mario Maker was one of the best games of the Wii U's lifespan, and its sequel brings the thrill of Mario-themed level creation to Switch. Super Mario Maker 2 builds on the successful tools of the original, adding new options, conveniences, and a visual template modeled after Super Mario 3D World. It also includes an array of clever stages developed in-house at Nintendo, giving you plenty of content to explore as you wait for the community to unleash its own masterpieces.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	"Woooooo!"

AWARDS

gameinformer PLATINUM	Awarded to games that score between 9.75 and 10
gameinformer GOLD	Awarded to games that score between 9 and 9.5
gameinformer SILVER	Awarded to games that score between 8.5 and 8.75
gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH	The award for the most outstanding game in the issue

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Persona Q2: New Cinema Labyrinth

A solid swan song for the 3DS

8.5

3DS

» Concept
Unite beloved Persona casts for a challenging journey through dungeons inspired by cinema

» Graphics
The chibi art style gives you a mostly adorable way to view your favorite Persona characters. The dungeons, however, are bland and repetitive

» Sound
The music has always been a highlight of the Persona games, and this soundtrack is an enjoyable "greatest hits" from the last three games. The Japanese-only voice acting doesn't take away from the experience

» Playability
Persona Q2 does a great job of easing you into its mechanics. You can expect a challenge, but it's gratifying to master the intricacies

» Entertainment
Whether it's the adrenaline rush from a hard-fought boss encounter or the thrill of watching the characters bond, this is a delightful journey in and out of battle

» Replay Value
Moderate

gameinformer SILVER

Style 1-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Atlus **Developer** Atlus **Release** June 5 **Rating** M

Back in 2014, Atlus introduced a unique crossover featuring its Persona and Etrian Odyssey franchises. Persona Q combined the best elements from both properties to craft a fantastic hybrid role-playing experience. The Etrian Odyssey games cater to the hardcore dungeon-crawling crowd while the Persona series injects the fun and personality long missing from Etrian Odyssey's stock characters and well-worn story. Persona Q2 continues on the path its predecessor forged, but it brings in the Persona 5 cast for a memorable trip to the movies.

Persona 3, 4, and 5 have greatly grown recognition for the series, and Persona Q2 feels like a tribute to these characters and their stories. While the narrative and perspective are centered on the Persona 5 cast, the Persona 3 and 4 teams also make their way into the story, which focuses on a strange theater – and our heroes must transport themselves into actual movies to find a way out. Here you'll engage in tactical turn-based battles, dungeon exploration with cinematic themes, and strengthening bonds between the party members.

While the mystery does enough to propel the action forward, the real beating heart of Persona Q2 is the character interactions. Seeing which members from the different casts mesh well is a highlight, as it's not always who you'd expect – like model Ann and tomboy Chie bonding over their similarities. Atlus took the time to provide little nods for longtime fans, such as jokes about Chie and Yukiko's bad cooking. You don't need to play the previous games to understand what's going on, but the familiarity provides some extra smiles for longtime fans.

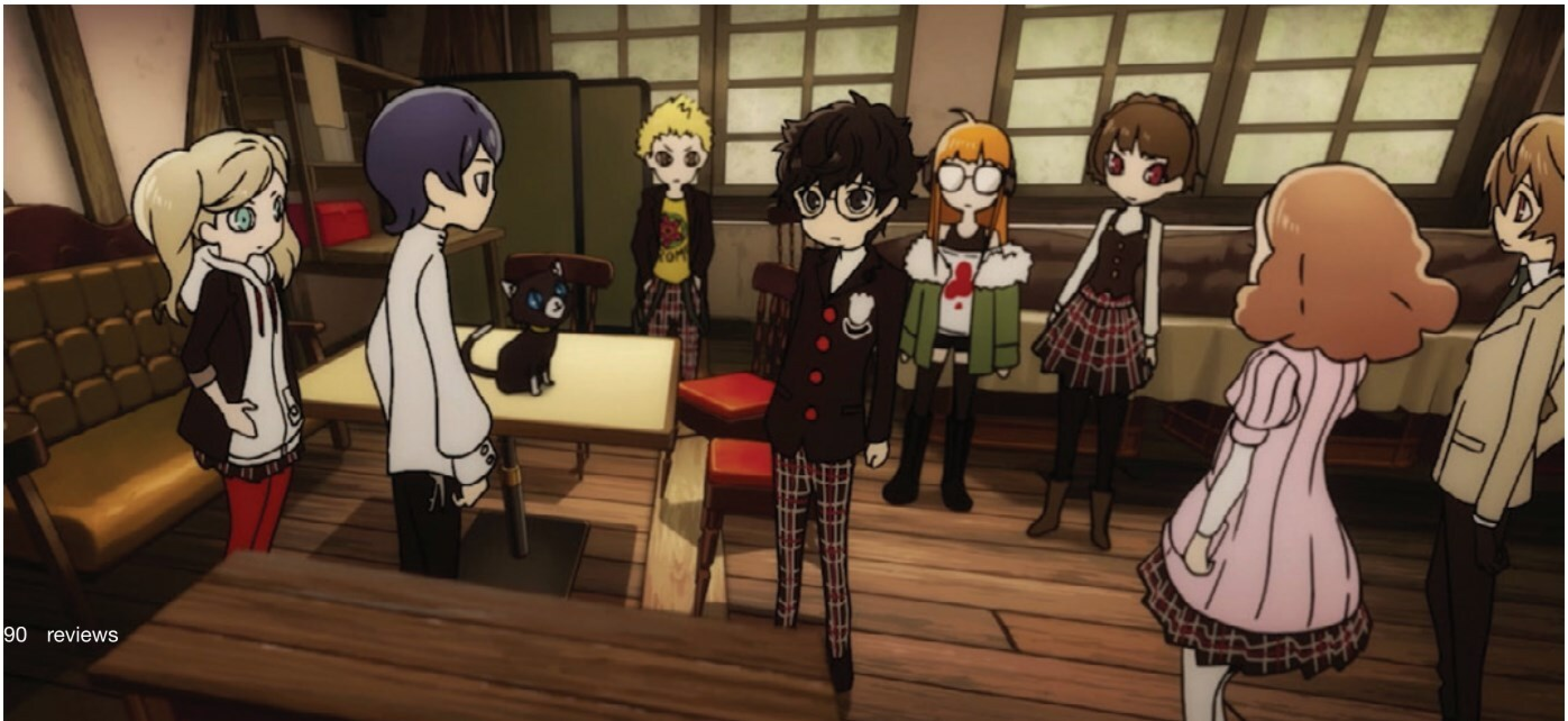
While Atlus does a good job of giving every character screen time, just be warned that getting all your party members is a slow burn; unlike its predecessor, you're not picking a cast or meeting all your party members early on. The expansive cast also makes constructing your team more complicated. You need to find the right balance of unique skills, strengths, and weaknesses to be successful, which gets harder and more time consuming with so many options to weigh. Unfortunately, if a character isn't in your main party, they don't receive experience. This makes it feel like you're taking a hit when you stray from your established team because you're either at a disadvantage by using an under-leveled combatant or must accept that you have to grind to get that member up to speed.

Every system in Persona Q2 has depth to explore. The turn-based battle system requires exploiting enemy weaknesses to get all-out attacks (a powerful team combo) and boosts that make your next skill free. Persona fusion also returns, with trips to the Velvet room to one-up your last creation. Every party member has their main persona with its unique skills to level up, but you can also equip them with a sub-persona, increasing your power and skill options in battle. I enjoyed changing up my party members' skills on the fly with sub-personas, which lends some variety into battles.

Using all the tools at your disposal is essential as you explore huge labyrinths with dead ends, switch puzzles, dangerous mini-bosses, and hidden treasures. As you move from one floor to the next, mapping out your path using the stylus is a necessity until you reach the final boss. Don't expect to get through this game without having to grind. Some short side quests dissipate this, but you go back and forth between areas quite a bit, whether to return to base to clear out your inventory for space or because you need to restore your health. I tolerated this, but it's not exactly engaging.

Persona is known for its themed dungeons, and Persona Q2 follows suit, basing each dungeon off a movie theme, ranging from superheroes to sci-fi. These also feature elements straight out of Persona 5, such as avoiding searchlights and sneaking past enemies. The dungeons were a bit of a letdown due to their repetition, but the fun battle system and character interactions help pull you thorough.

If you liked the original Persona Q, Persona Q2 checks the same boxes while adding a few new wrinkles to the formula. As a Persona fan, it feels like the ultimate tribute to the last 13 years of the series, with nostalgic music and callbacks to previous events. When I wasn't chuckling over a joke between the cast members, I was reveling in fusing new personas and finally besting a long, punishing boss battle. Persona Q2 is a worthy last hurrah for the 3DS, and helps the system go out on a high note. » **Kimberley Wallace**



Super Mario Maker 2

Building on success

gameinformer GAME OF THE MONTH gameinformer SILVER

Style 1 to 4-Player Action/Platforming (4-Player Online) **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Nintendo **Release** June 28 **Rating** E

Before Super Mario Maker's release on Wii U in 2015, making Mario levels was a privilege that belonged exclusively to Nintendo designers. Today, perhaps the initial charm of placing your own question mark blocks has worn away, but Super Mario Maker 2 does plenty to expand and improve the experience.

Super Mario Maker 2 looks, plays, and functions similar to its predecessor, which is still one of the most fun creation games ever released. Complicated elements like enemy A.I. and setting start and end points for levels are all taken care of for you, which frees you up to focus on the fun part: laying out the building blocks of the level. The menus are generally the same as the first game, and the core building blocks return. The tools, like seeing Mario's trail in create mode to identify proper jump distances, are all back, which is a great. The big updates for the sequel are mostly additions as opposed to sweeping changes.

The 3D World template is the only new visual style at your disposal, and it doesn't mesh seamlessly with the other templates (Super Mario Bros., 3, World, and NSMBU). You can swap between the old templates in a snap without changing the design of your levels, but changing to or from 3D World resets everything. Not being able to swap templates as easily is disappointing, but the new tools exclusive to 3D World are worth the technical limitation. The Koopa Troopa Car is entirely new to Mario in general, and locks the player into a very fast auto-run. It is used to create high-speed (and incredibly entertaining) platforming challenges.

Other big additions include the long-requested ability to incorporate slopes, which are a lot of fun. You also have tools to create more vertical levels and unique clear conditions, which leads to some of my favorite levels. This means you can craft and play scenarios where players can't touch the ground, or they must collect 100 coins, adding a fun layer of challenge and puzzle-solving I enjoyed.

The process of making levels feels familiar, and while I do miss the Wii U's stylus, both the touchscreen in handheld mode and using the on-screen cursor in docked mode work well. You are unfortunately forced to use the touchscreen when playing handheld mode, which is a confusing and annoying limitation. Radial menus have been integrated for selecting the various tools, and it makes the process move a little faster, which I appreciate. Creating in co-op is a little unwieldy and has its own learning curve for figuring out which player can do what, but working locally with a friend to make levels together is great.

Finding levels to play from other creators is easy, and seeing the Mii of the creator and the clothing they've decided to wear adds a lot of personality. You can also use stamps, write, and draw reviews for others' levels with commenting tools originally seen in the Miiverse. As a fan of the Miiverse who was sad to see it go, I am happy to see it living on in Super Mario Maker 2.

Playing local co-op requires you download the level, which is a bothersome but admittedly small hurdle, and I ran into the same issues as your typical co-op Mario game. Sometimes having others around is a hindrance, but the chaos can also be part of the fun. I ran into lots of levels that weren't designed with co-op in mind, making them awkward to play, but I like having the option even if it isn't ideal. Only being able to play online with random players at launch is a bummer, but I had so much fun on my own and with the rest of the game that the limited co-op options didn't hinder my overall experience.

The Nintendo-created levels, found in the story mode, are much more substantial this time around. Unlocking new clothes for your Mii and seeing Peach's castle grow as you complete levels is a nice incentive, and the levels are all fun. The creation tools, like Undodog, are also integrated into the story in goofy ways. The more than 100 levels function as solid Mario levels, good examples of how to use the new tools, and occasionally let you play with mechanics that have never been used in Mario games before, which was a fun surprise.

Super Mario Maker 2 is not a radical reinvention of the original Mario Maker, but it earns the "2" in its title with a story mode full of great Mario levels, worthwhile additions to the creation toolset, and new options for playing and creating cooperatively. The future is bright for Super Mario Maker 2, and I can't wait to see what the community makes with it. But even at this starting line, I had plenty of Mario to play and enjoy. » **Kyle Hilliard**

8.75

Switch

» **Concept**
Make more Mario with expanded tools and templates, and play more Mario with lots of Nintendo-created levels in a full story mode

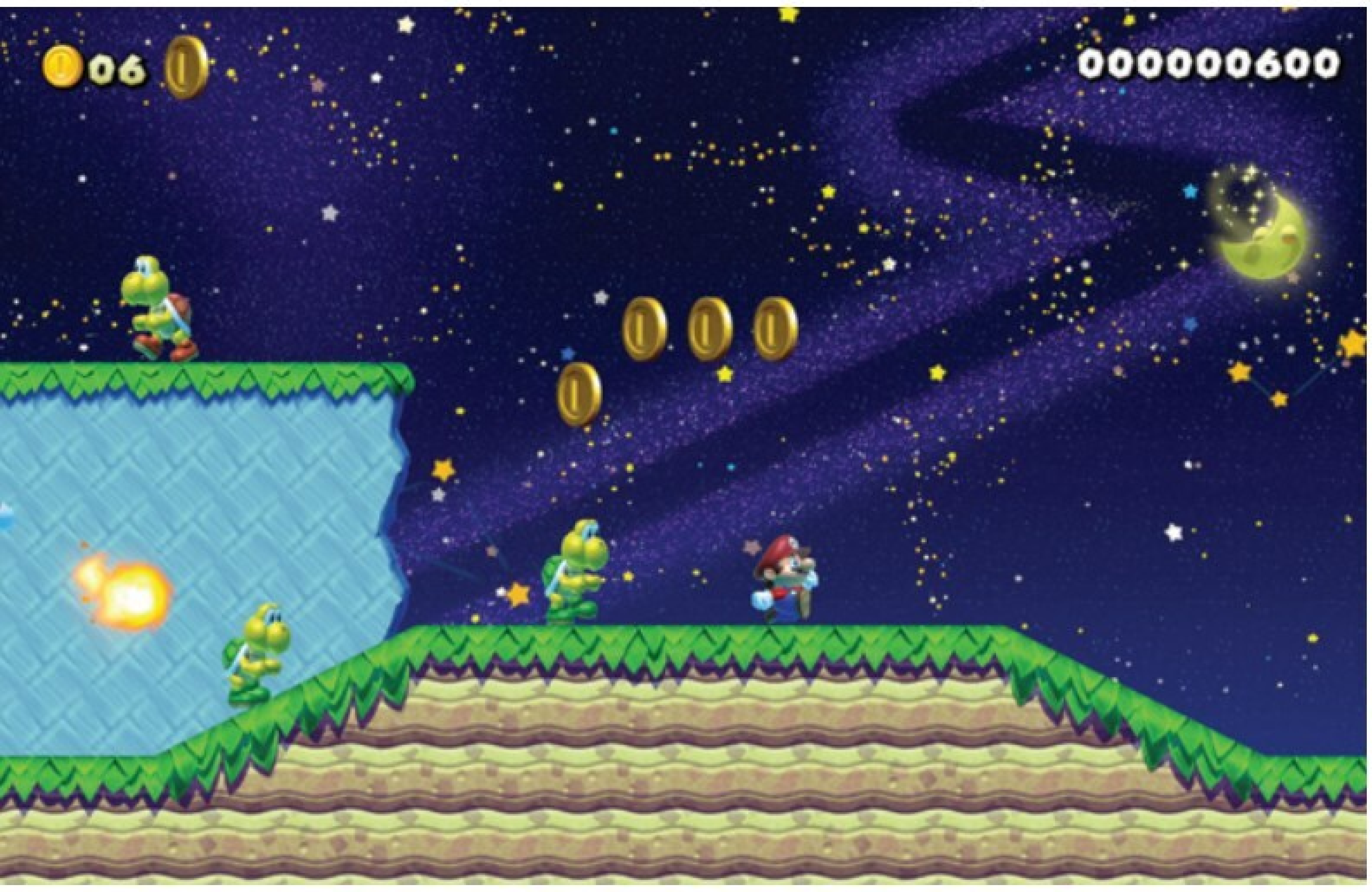
» **Graphics**
Mario looks great in all his renditions, and the user interface (an important element for games in the creation genre) is clean and easy to read

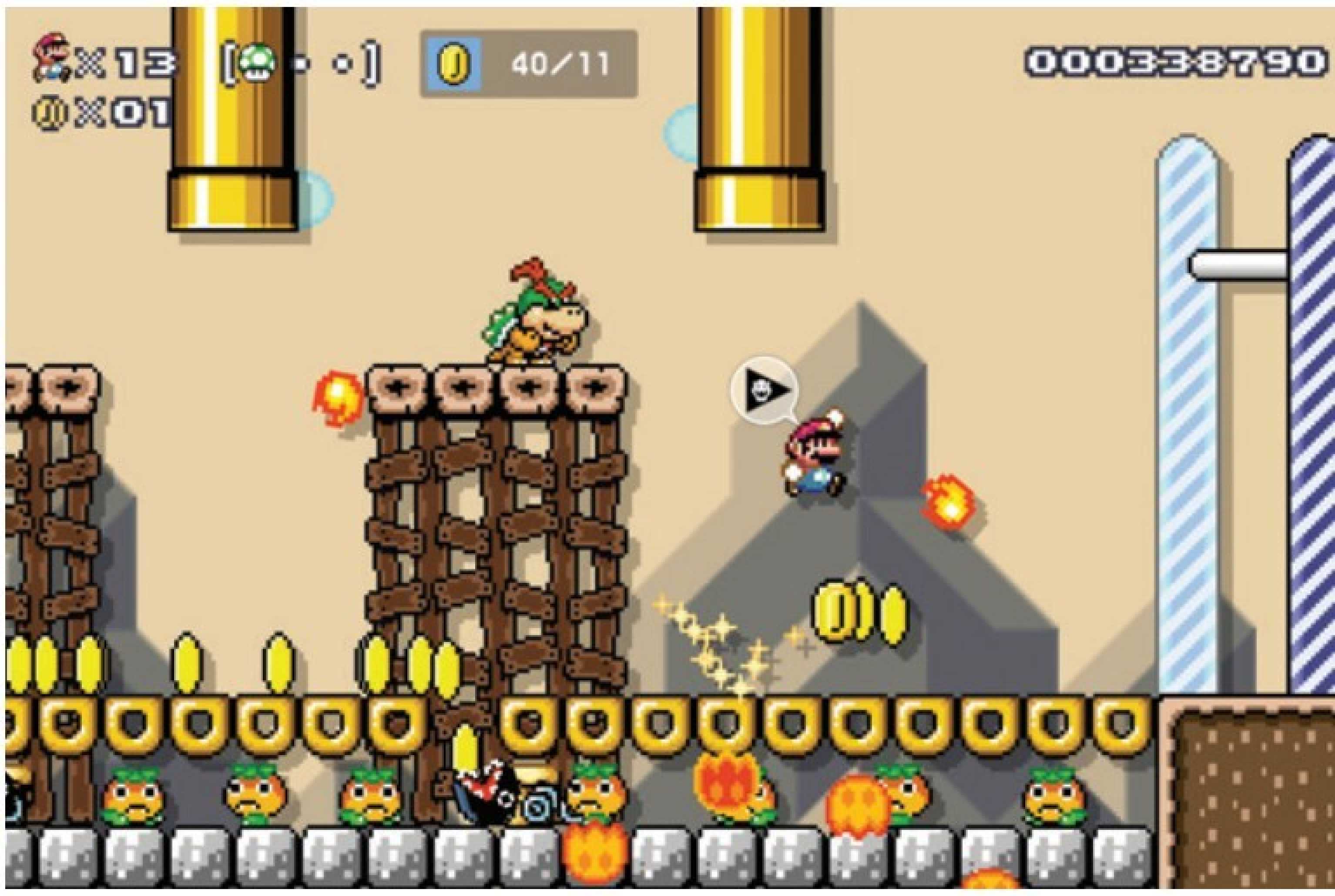
» **Sound**
The Mario themes from various eras of the plumber's career all sound great. The sound effects related to building levels are particularly charming

» **Playability**
Mario's platforming is identical to how it feels in his normal adventures, which is superb. I missed the Wii U's stylus for creation, but both the touchscreen and cursor-based controls feel smooth

» **Entertainment**
Building your own Mario levels isn't as exciting as it was in 2015 on Wii U, but the story mode is a lot of fun and the new tools lead to some novel experiences

» **Replay Value**
High





Outer Wilds

Wonder and frustration intertwined

7.75

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Annapurna Interactive **Developer** Mobius Digital **Release** May 30 **Rating** E

Xbox One • PC

» Concept
Explore a solar system as you try to escape a time loop and prevent a sun from exploding

» Graphics
From its landscapes to its oddly shaped characters, the art style is gorgeous and memorable

» Sound
The soundtrack balances twangy Americana with full-on orchestra, capturing the wonders of this zany universe

» Playability
Even after hours of experimentation, the controls and navigation are frustrating and can impede progress

» Entertainment
Outer Wilds offers an incredible world filled with memorable moments, but the experience is hamstrung by poorly implemented puzzles and wonky systems

» Replay Value
Moderate

Outer Wilds' premise is deliciously devious. As a newly minted astronaut in a fantastical solar system, your first day of space exploration ends on a dire note: The sun explodes, killing everyone. Luckily, you're caught in a time loop; each attempt gives you 20 minutes to explore the galaxy in the hopes of preventing the catastrophe from happening again. Outer Wilds is an adventure ripe with memorable discoveries, but it is maligned by a bad control scheme and overly obtuse puzzles.

The time loop is the foundation on which the entire experience rests. Those 20 minutes are a timer for you and all the locations you explore in the solar system. At the five-minute mark during one loop, you might be exploring the insides of a moon teleporting its way around the system while a planet nearby is bombarded into oblivion by asteroids. Learning what events are happening where and when (and how they interact with each other) is a key part of unraveling the mystery.

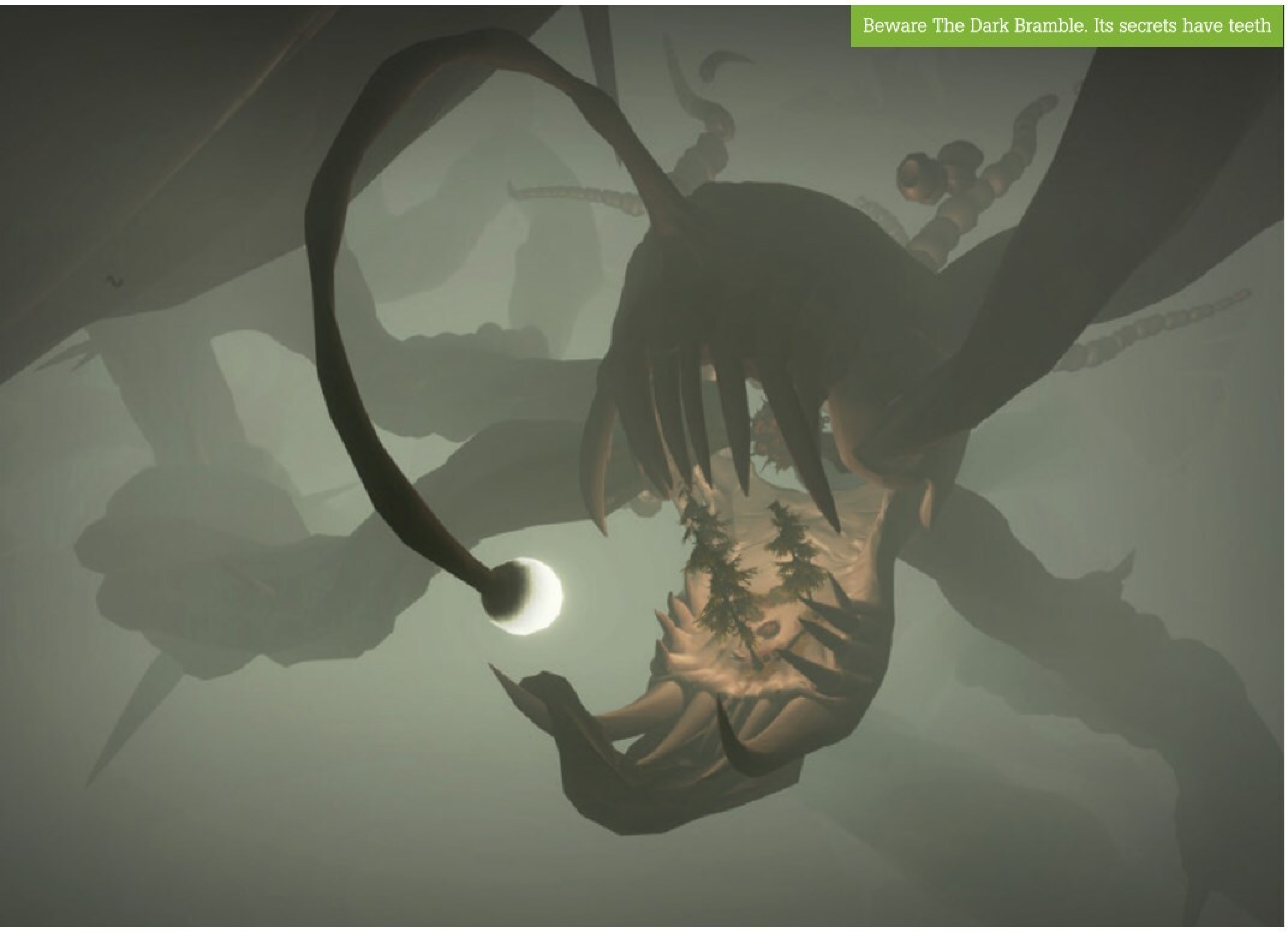
Every location you can visit is essentially a dungeon, requiring you to explore and occasionally solve puzzles with lateral thinking. All of these places are meticulously constructed and unique. My personal favorites are the Ash & Ember Twins, two moons in orbit of one another that circle the sun, feeding sand into each other and transforming the layout of explorable areas on each as the loop timer ticks on. Every location houses many discoveries: intriguing lore, archeological behemoths, and caches of information offering new directions for you to pursue. Though you die every 20 minutes (or less), each attempt can provide a new snippet of information that carries over to the next loop and brings you closer to solving the puzzle.

The exploding sun isn't the only way for you to meet your demise during your travels. Death is a hilarious, educational experience here. I've been crushed by shifting walls, flown into crunchy doom by my autopilot, asphyxiated floating in space. The hilarity of these demises does much to alleviate the frustrations of being lost in this galaxy – for a time.

I've had a lot of fun taking in beautiful vistas of meteors shooting across the sky or watching the ground shake as a place rises up from the sand. However, these dollops of wonder are easily outnumbered by the frustrations I've had at the hands of clunky navigation and half-baked systems. Outer Wilds opts for a semi-realistic control scheme when it comes to flying your ship. You must account for weight, gravity, and force all while manipulating multiple thrusters. Even after hours of playing, I was only able to pull off a handful of graceful landings. Certain puzzles require precise navigation through dangerous spaces, which is a nightmare to pull off because of the convoluted complexity of the controls. Even supposedly helpful systems like autopilot have a habit of veering you into the path of giant space rocks. Though losing five minutes of progress might not seem like a big deal in the grand scheme of things, a continual stacking of such losses thanks to misadventures wears down your patience.

The various puzzles are also vexing and exasperating. Some of them might sound nifty on paper, but they're often laborious in execution. One requires that you be at a certain place at a certain moment during the time loop to gain access to one of those information caches. What this amounts to is you waiting around for a long time until that area is accessible, kicking up space dust or twiddling your thumbs until the window arrives. Other puzzles give way to annoying platforming sequences that require nimble dexterity, and where a single mistake means you have to restart the loop all over again. I rarely felt any sense of accomplishment from overcoming these obstacles, just relief that I had earned a brief reprieve from the worst part of the experience.

At the end of it all, I admire a lot about Outer Wilds. The entire world operating on that 20-minute timer is a fascinating theatrical accomplishment of craftsmanship, but I find it more fun to think about than to play. A lot of ideas linger here, some of them beautifully executed, others slipshod and pushing against each other. I love roaming inside the bellies of mysterious planets, but don't like how the urgency of the timer undercuts my exploration. I have left Outer Wilds' galaxy feeling as much exhaustion as satisfaction, but also with a list of several enchanting interstellar moments. » **Javy Gwaltney**


Beware The Dark Bramble. Its secrets have teeth

Cadence Of Hyrule – Crypt Of The Necrodancer Featuring The Legend Of Zelda

A pleasant but discordant melody

Style 1 or 2-Player Rhythm/Music **Publisher** Nintendo **Developer** Brace Yourself Games **Release** June 13 **Rating** E

7.75

Switch

» Concept
Combine Crypt of the Necrodancer's rhythm/action formula with The Legend of Zelda's exploration, progression, and dungeons

» Graphics
With new takes on Link and Zelda and updated renditions of places like Gerudo Valley and Death Mountain, the pixelated graphics look great

» Sound
The multiple remixes of Zelda classics like "The Lost Woods" and "Bolero of Fire" are great, and so are the ways they're interwoven well into gameplay

» Playability
Timing your movements takes some getting used to, but the simple combat keeps you focused on maintaining your rhythm

» Entertainment
Cadence of Hyrule is a great ode to the Legend of Zelda and its soundtrack, even as some roguelike elements weigh it down

» Replay Value
Moderate

As you might guess from its name, Cadence of Hyrule – Crypt of the Necrodancer Featuring the Legend of Zelda is a strange mix. It takes elements from the Zelda series (most notably its revered suite of music) and combines them with the dungeon-crawling roguelike action of Crypt of the Necrodancer. The two series don't always mesh harmoniously, but as a whole, they get along well enough to make the mixture gratifying for fans of the series.

Cadence of Hyrule is ostensibly a Zelda game, but the twists from Necrodancer put it squarely in spinoff territory. The most drastic change is the need to move along a grid to the rhythm of remixes from the Zelda series; failing to do so prevents you from moving for a beat, leaving you vulnerable. It also has more combat encounters than your average Zelda game, leaning into Necrodancer's dungeon-crawling nature.

Combat is fairly simple. It takes time to internalize the variety of enemy patterns and how different weapon types work best against armored or ranged opponents, but once you have the hang of it, hearing your attacks line up with the beat of the music as you mow down enemies is a fun little thrill. You can play as Link, Zelda, and Cadence (the heroine of Crypt of the Necrodancer), and each of these characters have different abilities that give combat a little more nuance.

The rhythm-based gameplay puts a heavy emphasis on the music itself, and the new renditions of Zelda songs are a highlight. Each area features two remixes – one for combat encounters, and one for when all the enemies are gone (plus a short 8-bit version when you pause). Most of these songs are great on their own, but the way the music swaps between tracks (especially in dungeons and boss fights) makes exploring and taking on dungeons the best way to experience the music.

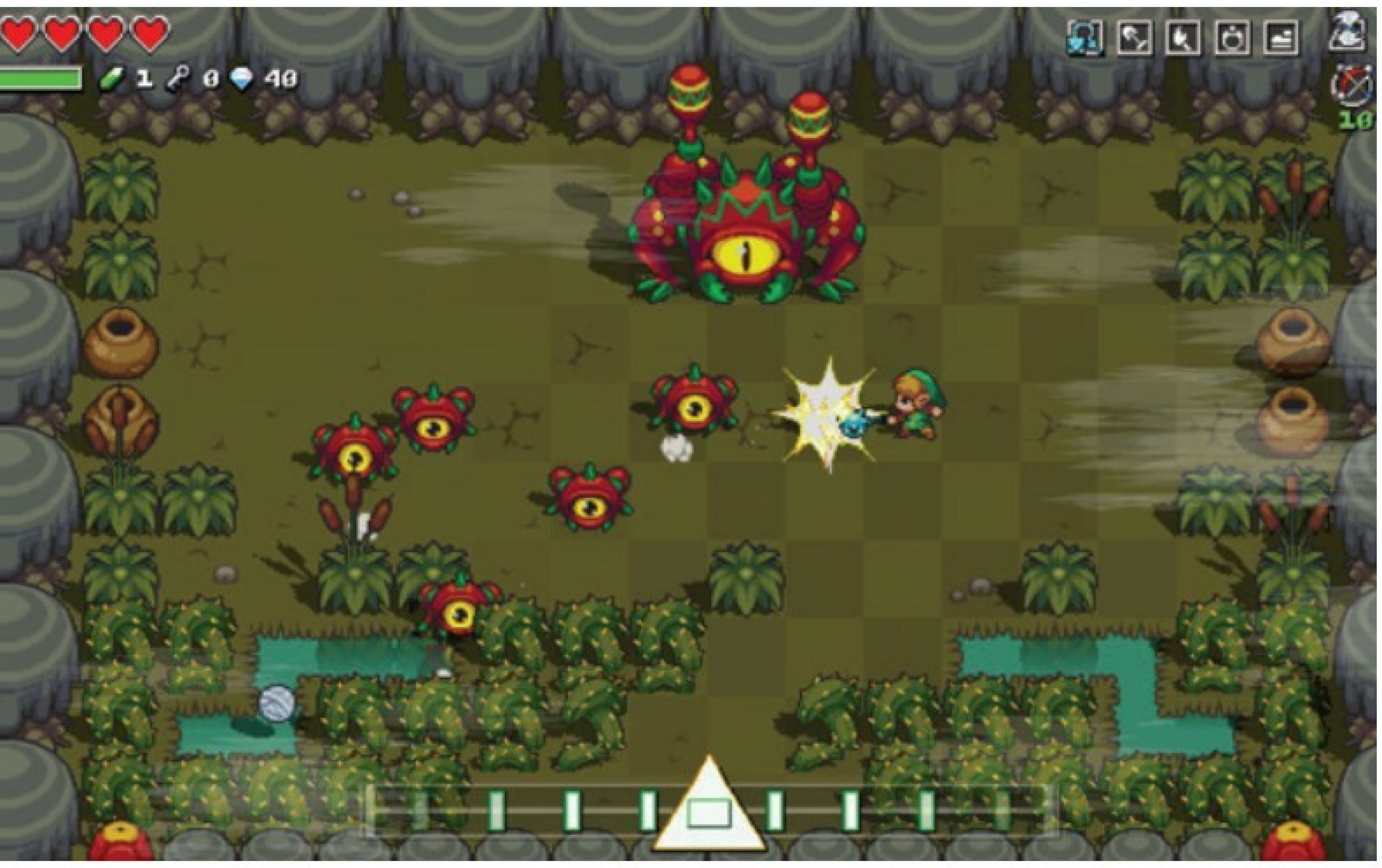
The other major twist Cadence of Hyrule introduces is the addition of roguelike elements, but mixing them with the Zelda formula doesn't always work smoothly. Your adventure will likely start out littered with deaths; a couple of hits from enemies is all it takes to kill you – which empties out all of your rupees, keys, and consumable items. This can feel punishing early on as you're learning the mechanics and how to move along with the rhythm.

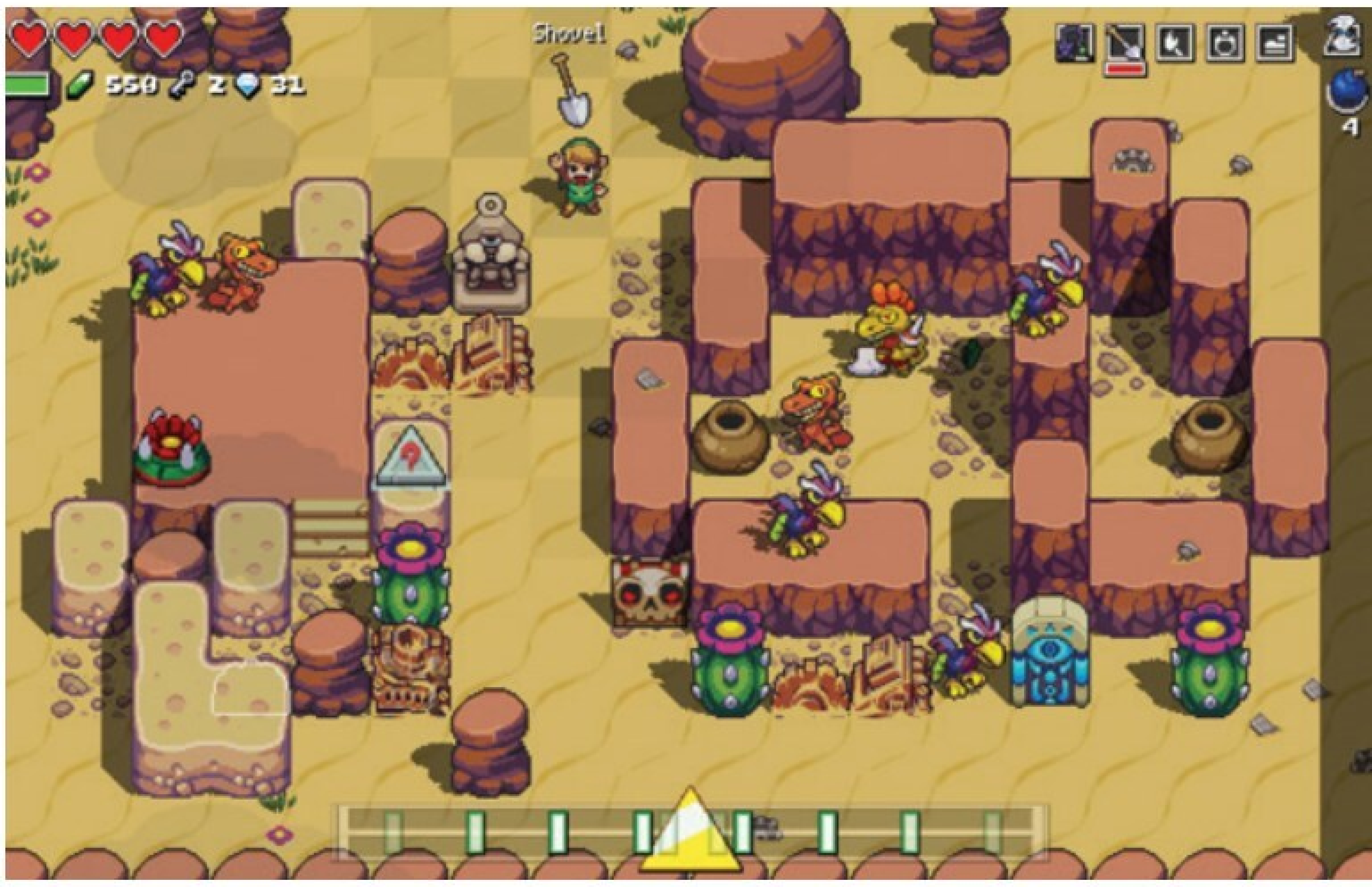
The scales eventually tip too far the other way as you build up more hearts, weapons, and items. After a few hours, I was brute-forcing most encounters without paying much attention to enemy patterns, since the odds were so heavily in my favor. Some temporary power-ups, like glass flails and iron boots, lose their appeal as you become a killing machine. Other items, like shovels, become a nuisance to re-acquire after they break. This uneven difficulty curve leads to only a short window in which combat is truly satisfying.

Dungeons aren't centered on using a particular item or trick, and have no real puzzle-solving. Instead, you work your way through a couple of tougher-than-normal enemy encounters until you find the boss key. Bosses introduce some interesting twists to combat, but the uneven progression hampers these as well, and I didn't have much issue plowing right through them. Considering dungeons and bosses are often the centerpiece of many Zelda games, that's disappointing.

Still, the Zelda-fueled side of progression, like finding heart pieces, new tools to play around with (like the Deku Leaf and Power Glove), and getting permanent weapon upgrades is enticing. I scoured the map for every collectible, even after I was breezing through the encounters. The randomized nature of each run means some items aren't put to great use while others (like the hover boots) trivialize certain puzzles, but I like how most of the major rewards require some critical thinking to nab.

The mashup of rhythm and adventure works in Cadence of Hyrule, even if not all of the elements from Zelda and Necrodancer intermingle well. The spirit of the Zelda series, including its wonderful sense of exploration, iconic music, and fun combat are alive and well here, enhanced by a killer set of songs that both celebrate and elevate one of gaming's most enduring soundtracks. » **Suriel Vazquez**

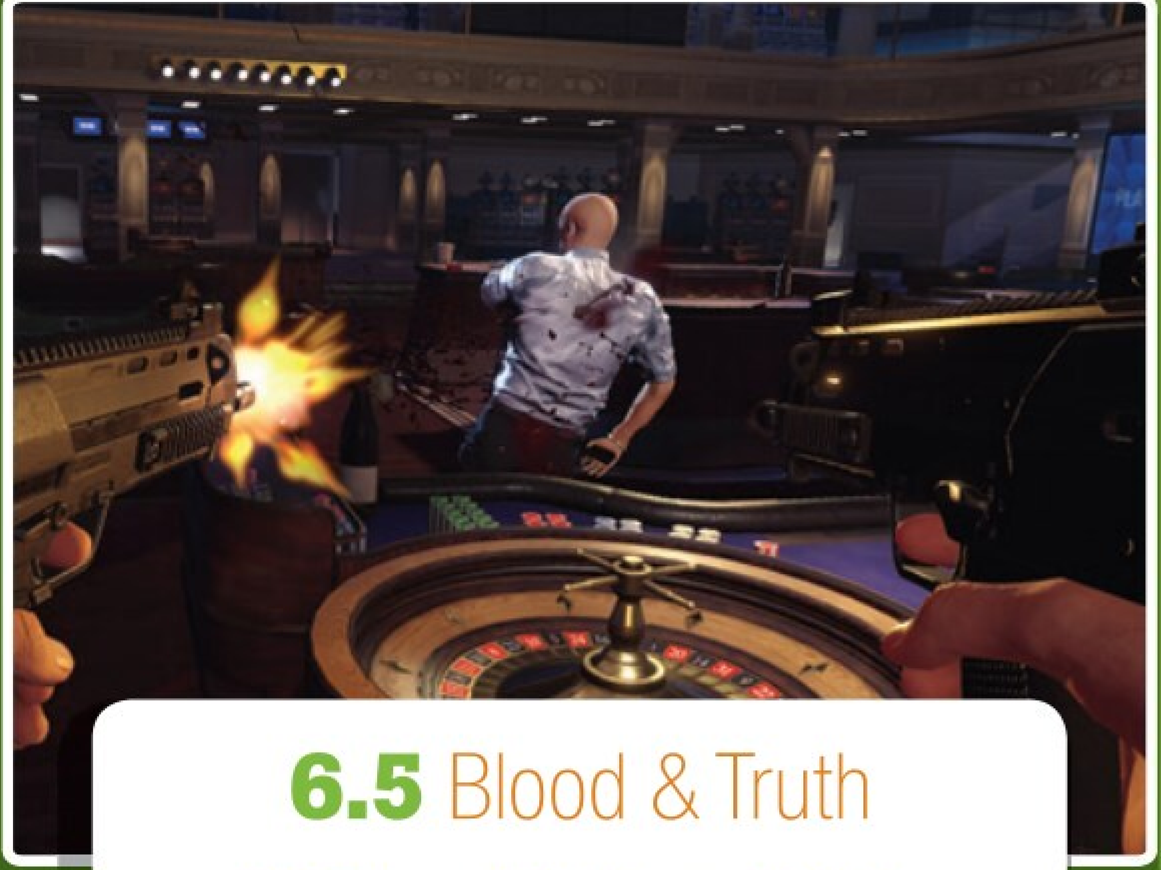




7.5 Borderlands 2: Commander Lilith & The Fight For Sanctuary

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** June 9 **Rating** M

After acquiring some overpowered legendaries and readjusting to the pace of Borderlands' addictive gameplay loop, I remembered why I fell in love with the series, but some of the passion is gone. – Jeff Marchiafava



6.5 Blood & Truth

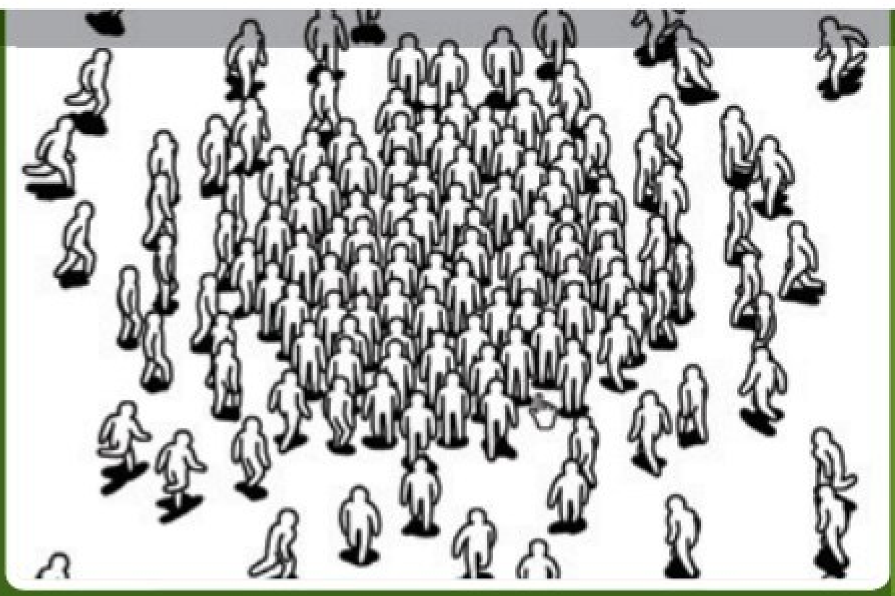
Platform PSVR **Release** May 28 **Rating** M

Blood & Truth has some elements of the breezy English gangster flicks we've enjoyed on the silver screen, but it lacks enough style and substance to make the formula work.
– Matthew Kato

6.75 Kids

Platform PC **Release** May 28 **Rating** NR

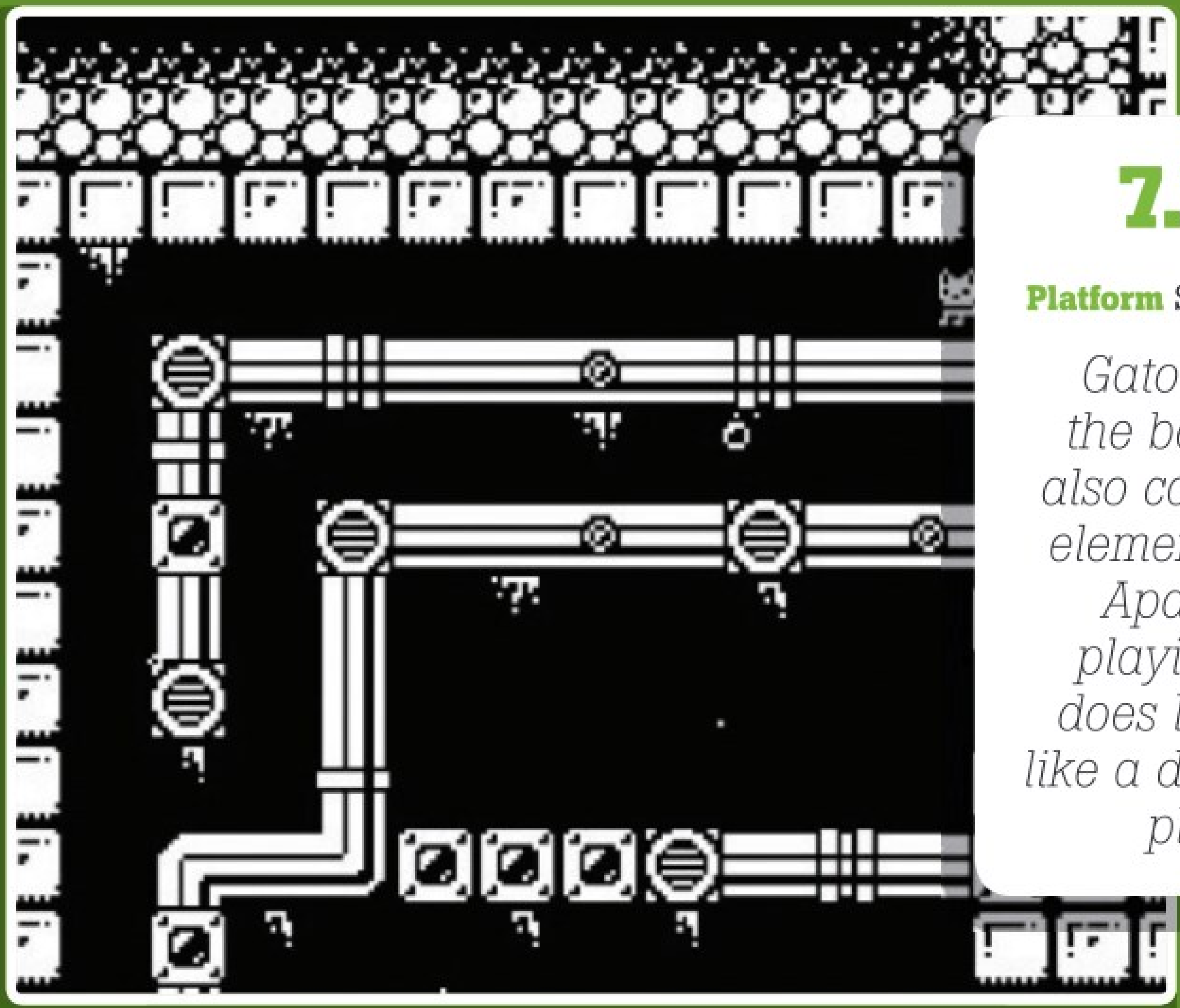
Kids is a fascinating example of conveying ideas through game mechanics. You won't get much out of it if you're trying to put together its disparate pieces beyond vague notions, but it's undeniably clever in places, which makes it a curious look into how people can both uplift and hurt each other just by grouping up. – Suriel Vazquez



8 Crash Team Racing Nitro-Fueled

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • Switch
Release June 21 **Rating** E

The racing excitement hasn't lost any of its luster over the years, and the added detail applied to the characters, tracks, and their surrounding environments makes this nostalgic trip feel new again.
– Andrew Reiner



7.75 Gato Roboto

Platform Switch • PC **Release** May 30 **Rating** E

Gato Roboto imitates some of the best parts of Metroid, but it also comes up short in important elements like exciting upgrades. Apart from the cute twist of playing as a cat, Gato Roboto does little to innovate and feels like a decent game you've already played. – Kyle Hilliard

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MISSING IN ACTION

The industry never has a shortage of games to talk about during E3, but a number of notable games were missing from the event this year. Sony sat out entirely, so we're not surprised we didn't get another look at The Last of Us Part II, but here are several other big announced titles that missed their moment in the spotlight.

by Ben Reeves

Beyond Good & Evil 2

Ubisoft's long-awaited sequel looked like it was still early in development when the company showed it off at E3 last year, and we're sure its release is still a long ways off, but we would have loved an update. Does the game still feature procedurally-generated areas? Is Joseph Gordon-Levitt still involved? We'll have to wait to hear more.

Bayonetta 3

Nintendo teased fans with this exclusive sequel to Platinum Games' character-action game back in 2017, and we haven't seen a second of gameplay since. We'd love more details. Hopefully, we'll see Bayonetta's hair-powered attacks in action soon.

Dragon Age 4

Anthem's attempted course correction has absorbed a great deal of BioWare's attention recently, but that didn't stop the studio from announcing Dragon Age 4 at The Game Awards last year. E3 could have been a great coming-out party for the RPG.

The Elder Scrolls VI

We knew beforehand that Bethesda Game Studios wasn't going to share more details about the next entry in the fan-favorite Elder Scrolls series at E3, but that fact didn't fill the void we felt leaving the Bethesda press conference without so much as a mention. It's almost been eight years since Skyrim released, and the world is dying to know more.

Metroid Prime 4

Metroid Prime 4 was a surprise announcement at E3 2017. Sadly, earlier this year, Nintendo revealed Metroid Prime 4's development had been troubled and the company shifted work over to Prime's creators at Retro Studios. That means we might be waiting a long while for this one.

Shin Megami Tensei V

Much like the offshoot Persona series, Shin Megami Tensei V is a classic RPG set in modern-day Tokyo that lets players battle unseen, supernatural forces. Atlus announced the Switch title during Shin Megami Tensei's 25th anniversary in 2017, but we haven't had many updates since.

Skull & Bones

Inspired by the naval battles of Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag, Ubisoft announced this tactical-action spinoff more than two years ago. This pirate adventure was originally set for a 2018 release, but the game seems lost at sea, and we don't expect it to dock before next year.

Starfield

Last year, Bethesda announced its take on a sprawling sci-fi RPG, but we only got a slow pan toward a logo. The studio has had another year to work on the game, but we didn't even get another slow pan. We know these games are a lot of work, but that was a mean tease. ◆

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